

'Need to change the behavior of our wickets'

While the members of Bangladesh's limited-overs squad are preparing for the upcoming five-match T20I series against New Zealand with the ICC World T20 in mind, Test captain Mominul Haque has been silently working on his game at the Masco Shakib Cricket Academy on the outskirts of Dhaka under coach Mohammad Salahuddin. After watching the methodical batsman go through a skills training session, The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin caught up with the 29-year-old to discuss his lonesome practices outside Dhaka, his expectations from the Test unit and the challenge to improve Bangladesh's pace-bowling unit. The excerpts of the interview are below:

The Daily Star (DS): What is the reason that you are practising here, far away from Mirpur? Is it to silently work on your skills?

Mominul Haque (MH): (Smiles) Not really. To be honest, you need a guide to practice. Although everything was prepared for me at Mirpur, I come here in the off-season and work on my game under Salahuddin sir. There is still a long time to go before the next Test series; maybe around three months. There's no other reason.

DS: As the Test captain, what was your reaction when Bangladesh beat Australia for the first time in T20Is?

MH: It was fantastic. The way Bangladesh dominated four games and won the series was outstanding. I never imagined we would be able to win the series 4-1. We managed to beat Australia once in Tests and once in ODIs, but I am really proud of what our team has achieved this time. It's a new beginning for us. We were unable to do well consistently in the T20 format so I think we needed something like this before the World Cup.

DS: How difficult is it to stay focused here while the team is busy playing limited-overs games on the international circuit?

MH: It's difficult when there is a long gap. I once played a Test match against England after five months and since then I managed to adjust to that. It is really difficult to play a Test match after a gap of five months no matter how many domestic games you play during that period. But we don't get to play a lot of Tests and results are also not that satisfying. I have adjusted to the situation and try to mentally prepare myself and play.

DS: You were suddenly handed Test captaincy in 2019 after Shakib Al Hasan was banned and you won the first away Test match in Zimbabwe. As the captain, what do you want to see from the Test team in the coming days?

MH: We won in Zimbabwe but that doesn't mean we have done a lot in Test cricket. I



think we have had bigger challenge like the two Tests against Pakistan and New Zealand. Regardless of conditions and opposition, I believe it's important to have the team perform. Everyone has to contribute and if you look at the stats, you will notice we win matches across all formats when everyone performs as a unit. So, I think if we can perform collectively then we can improve as a Test team. I would also like to add that we now have pacers who can take 20 wickets in a Test match in tandem with spinners. I think it is important for fast bowlers to know how to perform abroad in foreign conditions so I think it's important for us to work on all three departments.

DS: There has been a lot of talk about the pitches at home, where the pacers don't get enough assistance so they struggle when they go

abroad. What is the solution?

MH: I think we need to change the behaviour of our wickets. I have said this previously as well. When you have bouncy pitches, you will see pacers more interested in bowling. As a captain, when I include two or three pacers in the playing eleven during first-class competitions but then witness the pitch not offering enough for seamers, it's honestly disappointing from a bowler's point of view. You may have a few flat pitches where seamers can learn reverse swing, but the majority have to be seaming wickets where fast bowlers will get more purchase. Then you will see the enthusiasm among pacers and the craze will grow rapidly. So I think the change to pitches is very important if our pacers want to dominate abroad.



KINGS SURVIVE Bengaluru scare

SPORTS REPORTER



Bashundhara Kings were held to a goalless draw by Bengaluru FC in their second Group D match of the AFC Cup at the male National Stadium in Maldives yesterday.

The Bangladesh champions, who started their campaign with a 2-0 win against Maziya S&RC on Wednesday, were given a stern test by the ISL outfit, who had lost their opening match 2-0 against ATK Mohun Bagan.

Kings will wrap up their campaign against Mohun Bagan on Tuesday. Only one team from the group will qualify for the inter-zonal semifinals.

Although Bengaluru coach Marco Pezzaiuoli made three changes to his starting eleven, Kings coach Oscar Bruzon decided to stick with the same players, who had dispatched the Maldivian champions with ease.

The Bangladesh champions looked comfortable defending their own in the first half, not being too adventurous as they waited for the opposition to move out of their comfort zone. Robson Robinho was the most threatening for the Kings as he almost snuck in through the Bengaluru defence on 21 minutes only to be brought down on the edge of the box.

Jonathan Fernandes, the other Brazilian in Kings' ranks, had a swerving shot thwarted by Bengaluru keeper Gurpreet Singh on 35 minutes before Bishwanath Ghosh made an excellent tackle to deny Roshan Singh from

releasing a shot on goal following a nice one-two with Sunil Chhetri.

Robinho almost gave Kings the lead 10 minutes into the second half as he latched on to a square-pass from Biplu Ahmed and managed to poke the ball towards the goal, but Sandhu's outstretched left-foot took the pace off the ball before Roshan raced back to clear the ball from in front of the goal.

While Bruzon's single substitution – Mohammad Ibrahim on for Mahbubur Rahman Sufil – brought a little more cutting edge to Kings' attacks, the Bangladesh champions were made to work hard to keep their fort safe as a string of substitutions saw Bengaluru dictating terms in the final third. The last 20 minutes belonged to the Indian side as Chhetri, Alan Costa and Cleiton Silva combined to pound the Kings' goal with countless attacks.

Anisur Rahman Zico made a double save on 71 minutes before keeping out Cleiton's left-footed shot had 10 minutes later, but in the meanwhile, was lucky to see Costa's header bouncing off the crossbar and not completely crossing the goal.

While the possession was equally dominated by both teams, the difference between the number of attempts – six for Kings against 14 for Bengaluru – suggest Bruzon would be relieved to have come away with a point. Zico admitted that in the post-match interview. "They (Bengaluru) played with great intensity as they needed a victory to stay in the competition. We did well to come out with a draw. Now the next match against Mohun Bagan will be our final."

NEWS IN BRIEF

'Ronaldo guarantees a large number of goals'

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri said Cristiano Ronaldo has told him that he will stay at the club this season, something the new boss believes guarantees goals for the Serie A giants. "He is an added bonus for us, because he guarantees a large number of goals. Obviously, we also have to work as a team to get the best out of an individual."

PSG's Messi returns to Barcelona

Lionel Messi, who was left out of Paris Saint-Germain's squad for their Ligue 1 encounter against Brest on Friday, has returned to Barcelona with his family, reported Spanish outlet Mundo Deportivo. According to the report, Messi, who has spent most of his life in Barcelona since joining the Spanish club in 2000, went back to Catalonia to spend time in his home at Castelldefels. He is reported to stay in Barcelona until Sunday.

PCB delays camp

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has reportedly delayed its scheduled training camp and the announcement of the Pakistan squad for their upcoming three-match ODI series against Afghanistan, to be played in Sri Lanka next month.

The Pakistan cricket team were supposed to start their training from today in Lahore but with the recent crisis in Afghanistan due to the Taliban take over, the PCB is waiting for Afghanistan Cricket Board's (ACB) confirmation about the series.



A houseful Anfield erupts as Sadio Mane's strike in the 69th minute sealed the fate of the game in Liverpool's favour after Diogo Jota's 18th minute goal against Burnley yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Jota, Mane delight returning fans

REUTERS, LIVERPOOL



Liverpool made it two wins from two at the start of the new Premier League season as they cruised to a 2-0 home victory over Burnley on Saturday.

With Anfield in fine voice, at capacity for the first time since Liverpool's Champions League defeat by Atletico Madrid in March last year, the visitors looked like they might become the first Burnley team since 1897 to win back-to-back league games at the famous stadium after making a bright start.

But, for the second time in as many games, Diogo Jota settled Liverpool nerves, scoring his first Anfield goal since November last year. Jota edged Liverpool in front with his second goal in as many games in the 18th minute, a brilliant header in front of a first full Anfield in 17 months.

Burnley, the team who last season ended Liverpool's 68-match unbeaten

home league run, a record that stretched back almost four years, had chances to level, but their final ball was lacking at the crucial moment. Ashley Barnes thought he had levelled early in the second half, only to be denied by the offside flag, with Liverpool capitalising on their reprieve in the 69th minute, as Sadio Mane drilled home their second.

The hosts pressed for a third, urged on by a buoyant crowd, but they settled for two, and a second clean sheet of the campaign, to go top of the standings, and leave Burnley pointless from their opening two matches. This comfortable victory means Jurgen Klopp's side are unbeaten in 12 matches in the league – the longest run in the division. With Virgil van Dijk back in defence, they look a formidable unit once again.

Prior to Liverpool's first home game of the season there was a moving tribute to the former players, management staff, directors and fans who have died in the 17 months since a capacity crowd was last inside Anfield.

Goalless draws at BNS

SPORTS REPORTER

Both matches of the Bangladesh Premier League ended in goalless draws at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

In the first match of the day, second-placed Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club were held to a goalless draw by already-relegated Brothers Union. The draw ended Sheikh Jamal's five-match winning streak even though the three-time champions are still in second position with 46 points from 22 matches. The second match saw Rahmatganj MFS and Muktiyoddha Sangsada fire a blank, leaving Rahmatganj in ninth position with 22 points and Muktiyoddha in 11th position with 19 points.

SAFF fixtures rescheduled

SPORTS REPORTER

The fixtures of the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship have been rescheduled, confirmed the regional football's governing body yesterday.

While the championship will start as previously stated October 1, the gap between matches has been increased from two days to three days in accordance with FIFA guideline for Tier-1 matches.

As per the new schedule, Bangladesh will play their four group matches against Sri Lanka, India, Maldives and Nepal on October 1, 4, 7 and 13 respectively. The final of the five-team event, to be played between the top two teams of the round-robin stage, will be held on October 16.

Akbar wishes to serve the national team

SPORTS REPORTER

While left-arm pacer Shoriful Islam is on his way up and making a name for himself in the Bangladesh cricket team, Akbar Ali, the wicket-keeper batsman who led the Under-19 team during their maiden World Cup glory last year, is hoping to soon be capped for the national side.

"Our main goal is to feature for the national team one day and to serve the country for a long time. Our immediate objective will be to rectify our mistakes so that we can at least improve our game a little before being called into the main team," said Akbar before leaving the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) headquarters in Mirpur yesterday for Chattogram, where he will be part of BCB's High Performance (HP) squad's training camp.

The HP squad's training camp will start at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram from 22 August and is scheduled to continue till October 8.

The BCB has announced a 22-member HP squad for the camp, who will play three one-dayers and two four-day matches against the Bangladesh A side during their camp in the port city. The three one-dayers are scheduled for September 2, 4 and

6 while the four-day matches will be played on September 9 and 15 respectively.

Even though it has been challenging for the BCB to arrange camps and programmes for players out of the national squad during the Covid-19 pandemic, the cricket's governing body of the country must ensure players like Akbar remain involved in such training camps to avoid fading away just after a few glimpses at the age-level.

The camp will be held in a bio-secure environment. Chairman of the High Performance Committee Naimur Rahman met the HP squad on Friday and stressed the importance of the HP programme for the players in terms of reaching greater heights. He also reminded the players of the gravity of maintaining the bio-secure protocol during the ongoing pandemic.

HP Squad: Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Parvez Hossain Emon, Munim Shaharier, Shahadat Hossain, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Towhid Hridoy, Anisul Islam, Imranuzzaman Imran, Akbar Ali, Minhajul Abedin Afridi, Rakibul Hasan, Hasan Murad, Tanvir Islam, Rishad Hossain, Shafiqul Islam, Mukidul Islam, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Shahin Alom, Sumon Khan, Noman Chowdhury, Rejaur Rahman, Ruhel Mia.

