

CAN KIWIS UNRAVEL the Fizz mystery?

NABID YEASIN

Standing on his toes for a second, he slightly leans forward with the ball in hand before running towards the popping crease just like a regular fast bowler. This aforementioned part of Mustafizur Rahman's bowling is familiar to almost everyone including the batsmen who have faced the left-armed or have seen his game footage.

But what's next? The mystery, however, is stored in the next part of his bowling -- the delivery. That is the part that has made many team managements scratch their heads over, including the Australians who toured Bangladesh for five T20Is last month, and even forced Ashton Agar to refer to the 25-year-old pacer as a 'difficult customer' with 'incredible skill'.

And it is Mustafizur's guile and understanding of the game that is what makes the mystery all the more complicated for batsmen to untangle. He makes adjustments to his delivery right before releasing the ball. At times, he runs off with the intention of bowling a yorker, and depending on the batsman's movement, ends up bowling his typical off-cutter.

How Mustafizur, who is often labelled as a 'quick spinner' for his ability to not sacrifice much of his pace while bowling cutters, makes life difficult for the opposition was best depicted in the penultimate over that he bowled against the Aussies in the third T20I. Bamboozled by the Fizz magic, Alex Carey and Dan Christian could manage just a solitary run while they failed to even connect four deliveries at the most crucial juncture of the game when Australia needed 23 off the last 12 deliveries. Australia, in their five-match series, were not able to unravel the mystery and went back home after losing the only bilateral T20I series ever arranged between the two sides. Now, the Kiwis brace for facing Bangladesh in a five-match T20I series, starting from today at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

And with all the matches set to be played at the same venue, the biggest challenge for the Kiwis will be Mustafizur, who masters the craft of using the slow and low Mirpur surfaces to the best of his ability in creating even more illusion and deception.

New Zealand's stand-in coach Glenn Pocknall, however, has said that his side will try to reverse the role and instead put Mustafizur under pressure. While it is a bold statement coming from a side who are touring without any of their regular T20 players, the battle between the Kiwi batsmen and Mustafizur surely remains the most anticipated one before the series kicks off.

And only time will tell whether the Kiwis, even after observing the pacer's footage from the Australia series closely and chalking out a certain plan, will be able to unravel the Fizz mystery or not.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'A great opportunity as a team'

SPORTS REPORTER

Following a historic 4-1 series win at home against Australia last month, a spirited Bangladesh will look to continue their dominance at home against a relatively inexperienced New Zealand side as the first of the five-match T20I series begins today.

The scenario will be pretty similar to the series against Australia, with the Black Caps without a single member of their upcoming ICC World T20 squad. That leaves a bunch of inexperienced cricketers to take on the challenge in alien Mirpur conditions.

Bangladesh have never won a match

intact. We always say that we are a very good side at home and we have the urge to prove that and we will try to do that," Mahmudullah told the media during a virtual press conference yesterday.

The 35-year-old was also questioned about the impact of the decision to split wicket-keeping duties between Mushfiqur Rahim and Nurul Hasan Sohan for the first four games and Mahmudullah informed that both the cricketers took it sportingly and were happy with their roles.

"I think there is no such impact. Mushfiqur is a wonderful team man and he is happy to share his keeping duties with (Nurul Hasan) Sohan. Things are absolutely fine. Mushfiqur is happy and Sohan is also happy. Nurul has been keeping really well and Mushfiqur is also outstanding so I think it will be better for our team to share the workload," he said.

Mahmudullah added that while the visitors lacked experience, the Kiwis always do their homework properly and that means the hosts will have to play disciplined cricket.

On the other hand, Black Caps skipper Tom Latham -- making his comeback to the shortest format after nearly four years to lead a young side -- said that his side were well aware of the probable threats from the hosts.

"They have threats all around their group. We saw how well they played against Australia. They have some great spinners and experience in the group. Our batting will be challenged by their spinners. They have some fearless batsmen, who take the game head-on," Latham told the media yesterday.

The Kiwis underwent training camps in Lincoln and Mount Maunganui keeping the Bangladesh conditions in mind. Latham also added that they were expecting similar pitches to those that Australia faced last month and added that they needed to adapt to the surfaces for each game.



against New Zealand in the shortest format, losing all 10 encounters. The onus is on them to continue the winning momentum and gain confidence for the ICC T20 World Cup, starting next month.

Skipper Mahmudullah Riyad will also remember the thrashing in New Zealand earlier this year, when the visitors went lost all six white-ball games, including the three-match T20I series. The Tigers will surely try to maximise their home advantage.

"I think it's a great opportunity as a team (to win a maiden T20I against New Zealand) and we can keep our standards



"Mushfiqur [Rahim] is a team man and he is happy to share his keeping work with [Nurul Hasan] Sohan which is absolutely fine. He's happy and Sohan is also happy. Sohan is keeping really well and Mushfiqur is outstanding. So, it will be better for our team to share the workload."

MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD
Bangladesh T20 captain

Can batsmen overcome mental block?

MAZHAR UDDIN

Bangladesh's batting department will get a big boost as experienced Mushfiqur Rahim and Liton Das return to add experience to the side for the five-match T20I series against the Kiwis.

Despite a historic 4-1 series win against Australia last month, Bangladesh's batting remained one of the areas to improve upon as the slow and low Mirpur surface proved extremely difficult for the batters in the slow and low Mirpur surface.

Bangladesh's highest total in the five games against Australia was 131, but the hosts successfully defended their lowest ever score of 122 in the fifth and final game.

Skipper Mahmudullah Riyad's 52-run knock was the only fifty-plus score by a Bangladeshi in the five games as both the teams banked on bowling

heavy line-ups considering the nature of the surface.

The scenario may be pretty similar when it comes to the Mirpur pitch, which is once again expected to play on the slower side, especially during this time of the year when overcast conditions and humidity cause dampness on the surface that could lead to yet another slow and low pitch.

"I think it's very tough to predict the Mirpur wicket but I think it will be better to move forward with a positive frame of mind and expect the pitch to play well. But if we need to adjust, we can adjust. The mindset is important. If you rather think it's a 110 or 120-run surface, then you are going in with a negative mindset. Considering the strength of our batting, if we go with a positive frame of mind, we can put up a good score on the board," Mahmudullah told the media ahead of the series against New Zealand yesterday.

The series against the Kiwis happens to be the Tigers' last international commitment ahead next month's ICC T20 World Cup and both the think-tank and Mahmudullah will be hoping that there is improvement in terms of batting.

Mushfiqur and Liton's return will strengthen that department and, with the likes of Shakib Al Hasan and Mahmudullah on their side, it will surely bolster the team management's confidence and allow them to be more courageous when it comes to their batting approach against a relatively inexperienced New Zealand side.

It will be crucial for Bangladesh to tick all the boxes right and gain confidence against the Kiwis, but it is also an opportunity for the Tigers to register a maiden T20I win against New Zealand and possibly eye a first-ever series win against the Black Caps as they did against Australia not so long ago.

NEWS IN BRIEF

END OF A 'BITTERSWEET, BUT GRATEFUL' CAREER

Dale Steyn has announced his retirement from all forms of cricket, closing the curtain on a 20-year career in which he became South Africa's highest wicket-taker in Tests and arguably the country's greatest ever fast bowler. Steyn retired from the five-day game in 2019 but had been available for limited-overs cricket and hoped to play at the Twenty20 World Cup in the United Arab Emirates later this year, though he had not featured in the team since February last year.

MURRAY GIVES TSITSIPAS A MATCH TO REMEMBER

Former world number one Andy Murray went down fighting in the first round of the U.S. Open as third seed Stefanos Tsitsipas triumphed in a near five-hour contest on Monday. Tsitsipas won 2-6, 7-6(7), 3-6, 6-3, 6-4, even as Murray fumed over what he saw as the Greek's stalling tactics and said: "I lost respect for him."

Sabina and Co brace for international return

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh women's football team vowed to deliver a good show in the upcoming Qualifiers of the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Uzbekistan this month as the girls in red and green are all set to return to the international arena after a two-year gap since the SAFF Women's Championship in Nepal in 2019.

The outbreak of coronavirus in early 2020 saw some international engagements cancelled but they played the Women's Football League twice during this period.

The charges of Golam Rabbani Choton are now looking forward to playing two international friendlies against their Nepalese counterparts on September 9 and 12 in Pokhara before heading to

Uzbekistan to play two Group G matches of the Asian Cup Qualifiers against Jordan and Iran on September 19 and 22 in Tashkent respectively.

"The girls have been training since July 24 and they are now in good shape and in the mood to deliver. Our benefit is that this group has been together for a long time and produced good results at the age level in the past," said head coach Choton at a press briefing yesterday.

Captain Sabina Khatun said, "I think there is a huge difference between domestic and international matches and the experience of playing the women's league won't help us a lot. Rather, I think two friendly matches against the Nepal national team will help us find out our weakness and fix it before playing the matches against Jordan and Iran."



'History will be written once again'

REUTERS, Manchester



Cristiano Ronaldo declared he was back where he belonged after he re-joined Manchester United from Juventus on a two-year deal on Tuesday, with the forward dedicating the move to his mentor Alex Ferguson.

United announced that they had agreed a deal with Juventus to bring the 36-year-old back to Manchester last week, with the transfer now complete after the Portuguese forward passed a medical, secured a visa and agreed personal terms.

The 36-year-old Ronaldo said Manchester United "always had a special place in his heart." "Everyone who knows me, knows about my never-ending love for Manchester United. The years I spent in this club where absolutely amazing and the path we've made together is written in gold letters in the history of this great and amazing institution," he wrote on Instagram.

"It's like a dream come true, after all the times that I went back to play against Man. United, and even as an opponent, to have always felt such love and respect from the supporters in the stands."

Juve said the transfer fee agreed



PHOTO: TWITTER

Portugal's superstar Cristiano Ronaldo attends a training session at Cidade do Futebol training camp in Lisbon ahead of their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 European qualifying round group A match against Ireland.

was 15 million euros (\$17.74 million) plus eight million euros in performance-related add-ons as Ronaldo returns to the club where he won eight major trophies from 2003-2009.

"My first domestic League, my first Cup, my first call to the Portuguese

National team, my first Champions League, my first Golden Boot and my first Ballon d'Or, they were all born from this special connection between me and the Red Devils," added Ronaldo, who spent the last 12 years winning a glut of trophies at Real Madrid and Juventus.

"History has been written in the past and history will be written once again! You have my word! 'I'm back where I belong. Let's make it happen once again... Sir Alex, this one is for you."

Ferguson signed Ronaldo when he was a teenager in 2003 and British media had reported that the Scot convinced Ronaldo to return to United.

Ronaldo has often spoken in glowing terms of his time at the club and has previously described Ferguson as his "father in football".

The club responded to the post, saying: "Welcome home, Cristiano."

Ronaldo is set to join up with the squad after the international break and could make his first start on Sept. 11 when they host Newcastle United, if he returns unscathed from his duties with Portugal.

Ronaldo is expected to make his second United debut at home to Newcastle on September 11.