



COULD IT BE A STEPPING STONE FOR FUTURE RICHES?

SAKEB SUBHAN

Can Bangladesh win the World Cup? Even half a decade ago, that question would have been a preposterous one, but it has become less so in the 50-over format.

However, the proposition is as absurd as ever when it comes to a T20 World Cup, because the answer to the question -- if this writer is allowed what seems like a pretty safe punt -- is no.

In Bangladesh's case, this World Cup will most likely be a stepping stone and that -- bar some miracle -- is the best-case scenario. What lies before Bangladesh in the World Cup is an examination that will sift the good from the ordinary.

Since the dawn of the T20I age in 2005 till now Bangladesh have played just 112 games -- ninth in the list of 12 Test playing nations. So, apologists for Bangladesh's poor returns in the format can say they have not played nearly enough to have a chance against the big boys.

But then it is also instructive that while Afghanistan (84 matches) have gotten direct entry into the Super 12 stage of the tournament, the likes of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Ireland will have to play a qualifying stage to gain entry to the Super 12.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Ireland have to play

the extra round because they were all ranked lower than eight at the time of the rankings cut-off in March 2021.

Bangladesh are now ranked sixth and that may tell you that the country has been unlucky to be denied a Super 12 seat at the cut-off point, but there is good reason to believe that their current exalted position is one that flatters the Tigers.

In 112 matches, Bangladesh have won 41 and lost 69, with two ending as no-results. In their last 13 matches, they have won nine games (four against Australia and three against New Zealand at home, and two against Zimbabwe away). Without this stretch of 13 games -- nine wins and four losses -- their record would read: 99 matches, 32 wins and 65 losses.

Taking away from consideration perhaps Bangladesh's greatest run in the format may seem overly pessimistic, but the caveats virtually write themselves. Zimbabwe are not the strongest opposition, home or away; Australia were shocked by the slow and low nature of the wicket in Mirpur and the deck was stacked heavily in favour of the home side; and the case was the same against New Zealand, although they did manage two wins with players who will not represent the Kiwis in the World Cup.

In preparing pitches that produced a highest score of 161 over 10 matches and four sub-100 scores, the team management and the board seemed to have decided on the course they would take to the T20 World Cup.

Evidently, it was to prioritise wins over preparation -- gaining confidence over honing skills appropriate for the conditions they would face in the World Cup, if they indeed qualify for the Super 12.

The likes of Mahedi Hasan and Nasum Ahmed will not get nearly as much assistance for their orthodox spin in the UAE -- the odd bad ball will be punished and not just paddled away or, as in the case of Nasum on repeated occasions against Australia and New Zealand in Mirpur, yield wickets. While Mustafizur Rahman was close to unplayable in the home matches with his slower balls gripping and turning, it is expected that his threat will lessen somewhat on less helpful pitches in the World Cup.

When batting, Mahedi, Mohammad Naim and someone like Afif Hossain will be dealing with balls that will likely come to them a foot higher and certainly a few yards quicker as the pitches for the T20 World Cup are very likely to be much truer than the ones in Mirpur.

On the other hand, natural stroke-makers

who enjoy true conditions like Liton Das, Soumya Sarkar, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, skipper Mahmudullah Riyad and even young tyro Shamim Hossain have had precious little opportunity to sharpen their skills in the dull conditions provided in Mirpur.

In recent interviews, skipper Mahmudullah has placed emphasis on winning and that is what the team has been doing. There have certainly been positives as the team showed, particularly against Australia, that they can win the tough moments in a game -- and that is one aspect that should hold them in good stead.

But with Bangladesh's overall game -- the lack of a mystery bowler approaching the quality of a Rashid Khan, or the absence of lower order hitters that almost all other top teams boast -- the chances that they would go deep in the World Cup are very slim.

What remains to be seen is whether the new crop of players unearthed recently can give a good account of themselves, gain greater confidence in tough conditions and become torch-bearers of the next generation; or whether they will be ill-prepared for the cauldron of a World Cup and have their confidence shattered, making the last 13 matches seem an exercise in futility.