

## SPORT



## THE CURVE CAN ONLY GO UP

NABID YEASIN

Bangladesh went to Oman for the T20 World Cup in high spirits on the back of successive maiden T20I series wins over Australia and New Zealand. However, since arriving in the middle eastern country, everything has gone downhill, barring that one win against Oman 'A' in the sole unofficial practice game.

The nadir of disappointment was when Bangladesh succumbed to a six-run defeat against associate nation Scotland in the tournament opener.

Not only did that defeat shatter the confidence of a team that had been fearing a mishap since defeats in both of official practice games against Sri Lanka and Ireland, it also proved the preemptive threats made by the Scottish players and drew heavy criticism from within the Tigers' own quarters, supporters and media, instilling doubts in a team that was at the peak of their confidence even a fortnight ago.

Bangladesh stayed alive with a win against co-hosts Oman in the next game but the 26-run win came only after a major scare. At one point, Mahmudullah Riyad's troops appeared vulnerable and meek. Questions regarding their approach, strategy and ability were still raised after that victory, drawing snarky replies from Shakib Al Hasan, the player-of-the-match against Oman.

The Tigers only played like the group favourites that they were in a record 84-run

triumph over T20 World Cup debutants Papua New Guinea in the following game, but by that time a sense of unrest had already been created within the team due to the negative remarks from all corners. The team was not even spared the wrath of Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan.

On their way to recovering from the slump, Bangladesh made it to the Super 12

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stage with the added inspiration of proving the doubters wrong. For Mahmudullah's men, who seemed to have hit rock bottom early on in the tournament, the graph can now only go up.

Last-minute changes in group seeding by the ICC now sees Bangladesh alongside Sri Lanka, Australia, England, South Africa and title defenders West Indies in Group 1—the tougher of the two groups. But despite being

drawn into the tougher group, Bangladesh have positives to draw from.

The Tigers commence their Super 12 journey today against an inexperienced Sri Lanka side, who are four places below the Tigers in ICC T20I rankings and made it this far after securing a place through performances in the first round just as the Tigers did. It is true that Bangladesh lost to the Lankans in their warm-up game, but that was in absence of stalwarts Mahmudullah and Shakib.

If anything, that defeat exposed the opponents' weaknesses which can now be exploited and strengths that can now be guarded against.

Still, Bangladesh must come out with the A-game at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium today and that means runs are required from the likes of batting mainstay Mushfiqur Rahim, whose lean patch is yet to come to an end.

The Tigers also need ace left-arm paceman Mustafizur Rahman to get back to his usual rhythm. That can happen from today, with the rest of the tournament's fixtures to be played in the UAE, where Mustafizur recently shone for Rajasthan Royals in the IPL just ahead of the marquee event.

With hopes of Mushfiqur's willow yielding runs, Mustafizur's wrist doing the magic, Shakib carrying on his tremendous form with both bat and ball to the business end of the tournament and Mahmudullah and the squad's motivation and drive reinvigorated, Bangladesh can only be hopeful of better things in the rest of the tournament.

## 'Conditions can suit us'

SPORTS REPORTER FROM SHARJAH

With the aim to display an all-round improvement from the performances of the qualifying stage, Bangladesh head coach Russell Domingo is confident ahead of the Tigers' opening Super 12 game against Sri Lanka in the ICC T20 World Cup in Sharjah today.

There have been a lot of talks over the batting department, especially the opening pair which is yet to click in the world cup campaign. According to the South African, it will be crucial for Bangladesh to come up with a better show with the bat.

"We haven't quite clicked with the bat to our 100 percent yet and we know there is a lot of improvement that can take place. We are looking for a general all-round improvement in the batting department.

"Pretty happy with the way things have gone so far with the ball and we have been pretty good on the field. Obviously, we need to assess the condition tomorrow as we will be playing in a totally different condition compared to what we found in Oman," Domingo told the media ahead of the first Super 12 game yesterday.

"I think we've played well against Sri Lanka over the last couple of months and had some good contests, although it was a different format. These sort of conditions can suit us as Sharjah is pretty much similar to the wicket in Dhaka.

"The 2 o'clock start will also suit us which keeps the dew out of the equation. I think our spinners can come into the competition. It's difficult to pinpoint one or two players as we have got some very good players, including a world-class all-rounder like Shakib Al Hasan," Domingo said.

With the small Sharjah ground in mind, Domingo informed that there have not been high totals at the venue off late and added that the tall seamers who could hit the deck hard consistently, might reap rewards as well.

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## 'We have a slightly better chance'

REUTERS

Sri Lanka have already made their mark in the Twenty20 World Cup with commanding wins in the preliminary round and will go into their Super 12 contest against Bangladesh with a slight edge, the team's captain Dasun Shanaka said on Saturday.

"T20 is a very short game, and on our day, everyone saw how good we are," Shanaka told reporters on the eve of Sunday's match at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium.

"After winning those qualifiers, they have the momentum. It's good for them, but still, we've got a better side, I think. We have a slightly better chance," said Shanaka.

## Can Mushfiqur make Sharjah memories fonder?

MAZHAR UDDIN FROM SHARJAH

The Sharjah Cricket Stadium does not typically remind me of the masterclass from Sachin Tendulkar against Australia back in 1998 or the memorable clashes between India and Pakistan in the early 90s.

Sixteen years ago, this reporter had set foot at this classic arena for the very first time as the captain of the Bangladesh Under-15 team taking part in the Asia Cup. It was a dream come true for every member of that team, including Mushfiqur Rahim, now a batting stalwart of the senior national team.

With the passage of time I have transformed into a sports journalist and hence got one more opportunity to relive my Sharjah memories when I stepped into its iconic stadium yesterday.

Interestingly, the Tigers, who have not played an international game in Sharjah since 1995, will be playing their first-ever T20I at this historic venue today in their opening game of the Super 12 stage of the ICC T20 World Cup. So this will be the first

match at this iconic venue for Mushfiqur, who is desperately looking to rediscover his form.

Despite being inside the press box, I could remember every nook and corner of the stadium with ease. The huge stands surrounding the lush green field made me nostalgic and took me back to 2005 when I played for my country.

Unlike the last time, I do not have the access to enter the ground as sports journalists are restricted to work within the press box, which is almost three storeys above the players' dressing room.

Although I do not mind the restrictions that much as I am able to reminisce my fond memories of Sharjah, and coupled with the fact that I could proudly tell my fellow sports journalists that I once played alongside my once teammate Mushfiqur at this historical venue. And I pray and hope that Mushfiqur rekindles his old flame and lights up the venue today with a memorable knock against Sri Lanka that helps Bangladesh to a victory in their first Super 12 match.

## Time to play with freedom

AL-AMIN

After a convincing victory against Papua New Guinea that paved the way for Bangladesh's passage into the Super 12s of the ICC T20 World Cup, premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan said that the Tigers will now be able to play with more freedom.

Shakib was referring to the five Group A fixtures in the main event against Sri Lanka, West Indies, England, South Africa and Australia where Bangladesh will start as underdogs considering their past pedigree in ICC's flagship event.

His remarks in the post-match presentation ceremony on Thursday also spoke volumes of mental stress the team had gone through in the qualifiers where Bangladesh started as favourites to win their group that also featured lightweights Scotland, Oman and PNG.

The Tigers' reputation as a Test playing nation among the associates suffered a body blow in their opening game against Scotland which they lost by six runs, chasing a modest

total of 141. Since that defeat, panic gripped the Tiger's dressing room at the prospect of an early elimination. Unbridled criticism also did not help them either. The tense body language of the players out in the middle in their next two games was as if they were playing for their lives. They greeted those two crucial wins against Oman and PNG as a sigh of relief.

With the worst part over, Shakib has rightly said that it is now time to enjoy the game irrespective of victory or defeat. As one of the most skilful players in the game, Shakib also knows it better than anybody else that if you don't have the freedom to express, you will not prosper. Bangladesh has made considerable stride in the one-day format the game since 2015, which was more due to that freedom of expression and the knowledge of how to construct an innings.

The Tigers, however, are yet to translate that in the shortest format of the game, not because of not possessing the resources but more because of missing that belief. If you



PHOTO: BCB

are a decent team, you are supposed to hit 160-170 on a decent wicket in order to win games. For that the first six overs provides the launching pad. But Bangladesh have more often failed in this area losing too many wickets for their comfort. They are as good as any team in the middle part of the innings, but lack the necessary firepower in the last

five overs. They might not have the muscle that some other teams possess, but the Tigers can still compensate that by ensuring one set batsman takes the innings as deep as possible.

Bangladesh's first game against Sri Lanka in Sharjah today will be a clash of two familiar foes. While the Lankans have more variety in their attack, Bangladesh possess a

more experienced batting unit. The Lankans have two pacers capable of hitting the 145kph mark, but pace on relatively slow wickets won't be a worry for a batsman unless it is used judiciously.

Leg-spin or more precisely googly from Wanindu Hasaranga might be a cause for concern as most of the Bangladesh batsmen are uncomfortable negotiating it. If Bangladesh can handle Hasaranga well, they stand a good chance to win the game provided that the bowling unit backing up a good total against a Sri Lankan batting unit which is still in the process of rebuilding.

This Sunday will be full blockbuster games. It will start with Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka, followed by the all-encompassing India vs Pakistan clash. If that is not enough, fans can turn their focus on a mouth-watering Liverpool vs Manchester United clash in the English Premier League and then the post Messi-Ronaldo La Liga battle royale between Real Madrid and Barcelona.

Sit back and enjoy every bit of it.