

SPORTS



Sri Lanka's Charith Asalanka, who was dropped by Liton Das off Mustafizur Rahman's bowling at a crucial stage of the game, turned to be the destroyer in chief as he smashed an unbeaten 49-ball 80 to take the game away from Bangladesh's grasp in the two sides' first Super 12 stage encounter in Sharjah yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Mushfiqur ignites batting order

SPORTS REPORTER

The stability that Mushfiqur Rahim brings to the top-order has been synonymous with Bangladesh's success stories in any given format. As Bangladesh embarked on their Group 1 journey against Sri Lanka in the Super 12 stage of the T20 World Cup at Sharjah yesterday, the onus was on Mushfiqur Rahim to give the Tigers' batting the momentum they crave against his favourite opponents.

The right-hander's average stands at 42.28 against the Lankans and his ability to propel the innings was exactly what Bangladesh needed to get some momentum to start off their Super 12 journey.

Having played crucial knocks against Sri Lanka in all formats, Mushfiqur, who had been struggling for runs since returning to the side for the New Zealand series at home in September, left no room for doubt regarding his T20 capabilities.

His unbeaten 37-ball 57 lifted Bangladesh to a challenging total of 171 for four and gave the Tigers confidence in the middle-order, although the total eventually did not prove to be enough.

Mushfiqur did not look at all like a player who had been struggling, playing a fluent knock laced with five fours and two sixes. He rotated the strike to good

effect, not keen on losing the initial tempo from the Powerplay, and, with in-form Mohammad Naim batting well at the other end, Mushfiqur got his eye in with singles like he usually does.

Big shots had proven a problem in recent times but he dispelled any lingering doubts with a slog sweep off medium pacer Binura Fernando in the 13th over and continued to dictate terms from then on.

Sri Lanka leggie Wanindu Hasaranga had been touted as Sri Lanka's key weapon but Mushfiqur's fluency allowed Bangladesh to put the pressure back on the opposing bowlers. Two slog sweeps off Hasaranga in the 15th over meant that Sri Lankans' main threat not only went wicketless in his three overs, unable to complete his full quota, but also conceded 29 runs.

That set the Tigers on their way and Mushfiqur brought on his ability to play all over the wicket at the death overs. The ball had not been always coming onto the bat but Mushfiqur rarely looked like he lacked timing.

"It was a good wicket to bat on. Last few matches we saw as the day progresses it becomes difficult to score, so we wanted to bat first. On that wicket someone needed to bat through, so Naim's was a very good innings," said Bangladesh's Mr. Dependable following the first innings.



Conventional wisdom spells Tigers' downfall

AL-AMIN

When Bangladesh posted an impressive 171 for four against Sri Lanka in their opening Super 12 game of the ICC T20 World Cup in Sharjah, not many thought they were going to lose the game so badly.

Despite Sri Lanka's impressive start to their chase, the game was heavily leaning towards the Tigers, thanks to two quick wickets from champion left-arm spinner Shakib Al Hasan.

His double blow in the ninth over reduced the Lankans from a confident 71 for one to two for three. The Lankans were reduced to 79-4 by the end of the 10th over, with medium pacer Saifuddin getting danger-man Wanindu Hasaranga with a well disguised slower delivery.

But after that, nothing went right for the Tigers thanks to an inexplicably stereotypical mindset from skipper Mahmudullah.

Shakib did not bowl an over after that till his third and final in the 17th while Mustafizur also had three important overs to bowl, but the captain only turned to him when the damage had already been done.

Bangladesh played three spinners, including left-arm twerker Nasum Ahmed, but the captain also ignored him, probably for being expensive in his first two overs.

Instead, Mahmudullah himself bowled two overs and gave one to fellow part time off-spinner



Afif Hossain. The reason for not turning to left-arm spinners was probably because there were two left-handed batsmen out in the middle -- Charith Asalanka (80 not out of 49 balls) and Bhanuka Rajapaksa (53 off 31 balls).

Conventionally, captains tend to follow that pattern. But it is not like a bible or a video game that one plays virtually at home. Cricket out in the middle is all about trusting your bowling unit and adjusting accordingly to situations. Good captains always try to play to their strength, not just follow set patterns.

Here, Mahmudullah was visibly very rigid about not moving an inch from that set pattern. The captain might argue that they could have won the game had Liton Das not spilled a couple

of sitters in the deep at crucial moments. But not many will buy his argument, nor his decision to ignore Shakib when he was needed most primarily to keep the runs in check and get another wicket to expose Sri Lanka's lower-order.

When Mahmudullah bowled the 12th over, it made some sense since he had experience on his side. But when he threw the ball to Afif for the next over, the only justification was that he was trying not only to shield Nasum from further assault but also that he could not trust Shakib unless the left-handed partnership was broken.

The outcome was ominous. Afif conceded 15 runs in that forgettable over and Mahmudullah dared to bowl a second over only to concede 16 and allow the Lankans to seize complete control of the game. Mahmudullah also brought Saifuddin earlier than anticipated to do some damage control, but he too disappointed the captain, conceding 22 runs in the 16th over.

By the time he finally brought Shakib back into the attack in the 17th over, the Lankans had seized complete control of the game, needing 13 runs from 18 deliveries.

Mahmudullah also brought Nasum Ahmed for the penultimate over and the beleaguered left-arm spinner broke a terrific 86-run fifth wicket partnership but could do little to stop the chastening defeat.

Mahmudullah will certainly learn from this mistake -- which is indeed a costly one on the biggest stage.

Afghanistan look to maintain winning streak

AGENCIES

Afghanistan's Twenty20 World Cup preparation has been far from ideal in the aftermath of the country's Taliban takeover in August but captain Mohammad Nabi hopes his team's performance can bring about some joy back home.

Afghanistan take on Scotland today. Two teams so far played six T20I matches and Afghanistan has never lost a T20I game against Scotland.

But Scotland are brimming with confidence ahead of their Super 12 clash and the side want to use the mega event as a platform to push their case to become cricket's next full member, batsman Calum MacLeod said on Sunday.

Due to visa issues the Afghan team arrived in the United Arab Emirates late and a bit undercooked, having played only three T20 internationals against Zimbabwe since March last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not that ideal," Nabi told reporters on Sunday, a day ahead of their opening Super 12 match against Scotland in Sharjah.

"The fans are really waiting because the only happiness

in Afghanistan is cricket. If we do well in the tournament and win games, the fans will be really happy and there will be a lot of smiles on faces," he said.

Meanwhile, the Scottish side won all three matches in the preliminary round, including a victory over Bangladesh, to seal their spot in Group Two.

Scotland, currently an associate side, have long harboured hopes of getting promoted to become full members - the elite group of teams permitted to play in the traditional five-day test matches.

The International Cricket Council has 12 full members, with Ireland and Afghanistan the last teams to be promoted in 2017.

Progressing to the Super 12 stage will allow Scotland, who famously defeated England in a 50-over international three years back, opportunities to rub shoulders with the game's elite.

"I think it's hugely significant, not just for the team but for the organisation and some of the aspirations that Cricket Scotland have," MacLeod, 32, told reporters.

"We want to be the leading associate, and we want to push our case to be the next full member."



'Mistakes were the two dropped catches'

SPORTS REPORTER from Sharjah

Bangladesh batter Mushfiqur Rahim pointed at the two dropped catches behind the reason for their five-wicket defeat against Sri Lanka in Sharjah yesterday.

"To be honest, there is nothing to blame as no matter how many runs we have scored, there would've been some small mistakes. Our mistakes today (yesterday) were the two dropped catches of Liton despite the fact that he's a very good fielder. It happened in crucial stages of the game as the two lefty batters (Charith Asalanka and Bhanuka Rajapaksa) were batting really well.

"The wicket was good despite we have witnessed a lack of runs on the surface off late. We knew 170 was not a winning score but if we could've utilised the opportunity, we could've turned the game in our favour," Mushfiqur told the media after the game yesterday.

The experienced cricketer finally

returned to form after going through a lean patch, scoring an unbeaten 57 off just 37 balls.

"Obviously I wasn't in good touch in the recent five or six games but the way the criticism was going against me, it seemed that I wasn't scoring runs for five-six years. But I'll try to contribute, be it scoring ten or eighty runs for the success of my team in the coming days."

Meanwhile there have been a lot of talks over Mahmudullah Riyad's captaincy after Shakib Al Hasan had one over left of his full quota of overs at the end of game.

"I think it's part of the game as the wicket was good and the two lefty batters were set and we wanted to bring Shakib into the attack in the latter part of the innings. Shakib is a champion bowler and he can take pressure in any situation and I don't think that not bringing Shakib in the bowling [earlier] can be the reason behind our defeat," said Mushfiqur.



Bangladeshi fans outnumbered their Sri Lankan counterparts in the stands of the Sharjah Cricket Stadium yesterday, cheering every boundary and wicket by Bangladesh. However, despite the crowd doing their bit to cheer and support the players from the gallery, the Tigers could not reciprocate, failing to provide the fans with a memorable day.

PHOTO: AFP

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SCORES IN BRIEF
BANGLADESH
171 for 4 in 20 overs (Naim 62, Mushfiqur 57, Karunaratne 1-12, Fernando 1-27)
SRI LANKA
172 for 5 in 18.5 overs (Asalanka 80, Rajapaksa 53, Shakib 2-17, Nasum 2-29)
RESULT
Sri Lanka won by 5 wickets.
PLAYER-OF-THE-MATCH
Charith Asalanka

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