

SPORT

'Bangladesh can give us a tough time'

SPORTS REPORTER FROM CHITTAGONG

Pakistan have a 10-0 record against Bangladesh from eleven Tests since 2001.. Six of these wins have been by either an innings or 300-plus runs and three by seven or more wickets.

The only time Bangladesh came close to beating Pakistan was in 2003 at Multan, when Pakistan were reduced to 257 for nine in chase of a target of 261.

But Inzamam-ul-Haq, batting alongside number eleven batsman Yasir Ali, led Pakistan to a thrilling one-wicket win.

Despite having all the stats and records beside them and a fine run of form in recent times, skipper Babar Azam is wary of the threat that he will face against Bangladesh in the first of the two-match Test series starting at the Zahir Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong today.

The new-look Pakistan side drew a two-match series in West Indies in August this year while also managing to win their previous two-Test series against Zimbabwe

and South Africa.

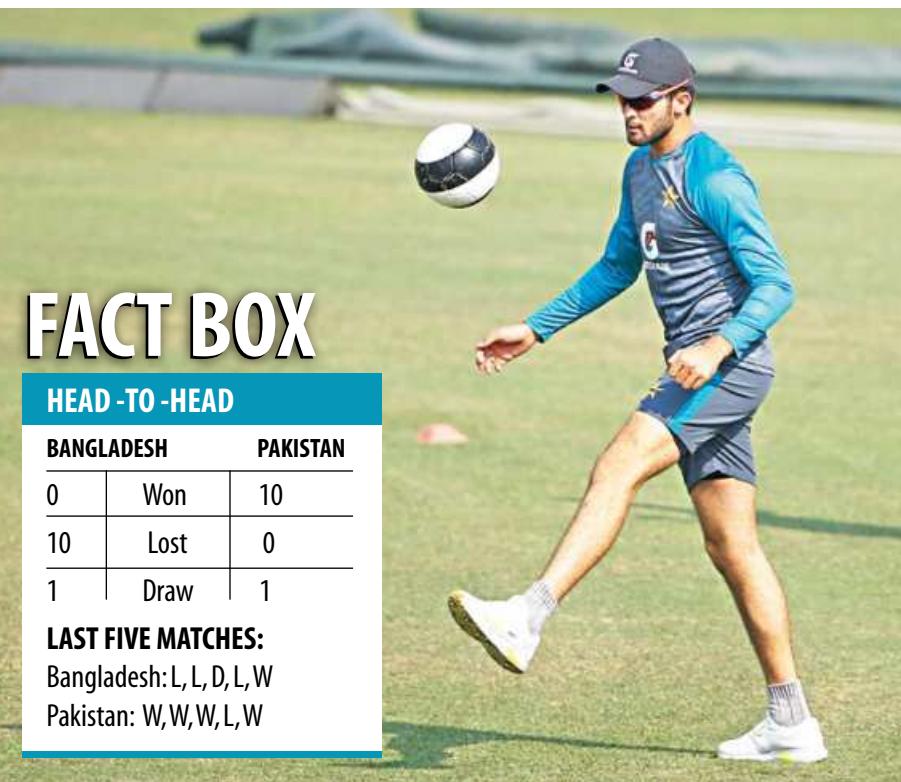
"The difference is the conditions. This is their (Bangladesh) turf, they will play in their own conditions. We are not taking them lightly. They are missing out on a few experienced cricketers, some cricketers are in and out of the team. They are a young side. But those who will be playing, have the experience of playing in such conditions. It's a bit difficult for us to adjust in quick time. They can give us a tough time".

Apart from seamers like Shaheen Afridi and Hasan Ali, the visitors are well aware of the spinning tracks in Bangladesh and are banking on spinners Nauman Ali and Sajid Khan, who were included in the 12-member squad for the first Test.

"Our experienced bowlers will help and spinners are always key in Asian conditions. We have top-class spinners who have been playing for a long time. Our advantage is that many of us are in a nice rhythm and we need to carry the momentum into the Test series," he said.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



FACT BOX

HEAD-TO-HEAD

BANGLADESH	PAKISTAN
0	Won
10	Lost
1	Draw

LAST FIVE MATCHES:

Bangladesh: L, L, D, L, W

Pakistan: W, W, W, L, W

MAZHAR UDDIN FROM CHITTAGONG

Compared to other cricketing nations, Bangladesh have probably given the least emphasis to improving in the Test format after joining cricket's elite format more than 20 years ago. There has never been long-term planning or specific targets to work towards, which is why Bangladesh continue to struggle to become a better Test unit.

Following a disappointing performance in the first cycle of the ICC World Test Championship (WTC), which saw the Tigers end at bottom of the table after losing six games and managing to draw one, skipper Mominul Haque will begin the second cycle with the aim to improve their fortunes.

Bangladesh will be up against a spirited Pakistan side when they

start the second cycle with the first game of the two-match Test series starting today at the Zahir Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong.

There have been many past instances when the focus has been on short-term glories, secured with tailor-made home surfaces that can undo opponents. In some cases, the Tigers even managed to get favourable results but in the long run it had a negative impact on their overall approach towards the Test format.

Mominul is aware that his team's approach in the longest format has always been result-oriented, but he added that they were now heading in a new direction and that process would begin with the Pakistan Tests.

"You all want results, isn't it? Obviously, we have long-term thinking on our minds, especially

when we play Test cricket. It's important not to think about the result from the beginning. Instead, we should move slowly and gradually and head in that direction. You all will get to realise once we play one or two series and you can see where we are heading in Test cricket," Mominul said yesterday.

Since Mahmudullah Riyad has officially announced his retirement from Tests and Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal have been sidelined by injury, it is high time for Mominul and the team management to accept the reality that they cannot rely on seniors and to start moving forward with a new set of players.

Interestingly, this will be only the third instance when the Tiger will be without Shakib and Tamim in a home Test and it is a challenge Mominul is ready to accept.

"Pakistan are arguably one of the best and strongest Test teams in world cricket so it will be challenging for us. We don't have our senior players and that is disappointing for us. But having said that we can't sit back, instead those who are new and young need to take responsibility. It's a great opportunity for them to get exposure and for us to assess their game," he said.

The new cycle of the WTC will see Bangladesh play Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka at home while also travelling to South Africa, West Indies and New Zealand for away series.

When asked where he wants to see Bangladesh in the rankings when the second cycle ends, Mominul replied: "I will be happy if we can move two or three steps ahead."

Tigresses slip against Thailand

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Women's cricket team tasted their first defeat against Thailand at the ICC Women's World Cup qualifier match in Harare, yesterday. Chasing a humble target of 177, Thai opener Sornmarin Tippoch and Nathakan Chantham strung together a 97-run opening partnership. Tippoch played a 69-run knock, featuring seven boundaries, and was adjudged the player-of-the-match.

Chantham played as a second-fiddle, scoring 37 runs. After their departure, Nannapak Koncharoenkai and skipper Naruemol Chaiwai remained unbeaten on 14 and 5 runs, respectively, before bad light halted the play when Thailand were at 132 for 2 after 39.2 overs. Thailand was eventually declared the winners as they won by 16 runs in D/L method.

Earlier, Tigresses were sent to bat first. Sharmin Akhter, who scored a blazing ton against USA in the previous match, couldn't keep her form going as she and skipper Nigar Sultan both departed after scoring a solitary run. Opener Mursida Khatun scored 46 runs and yielded a 84-run third-wicket stand with Fargana Hoque before Thai bowler Tippoch scalped her wicket.

Fargana went on to score a half-century before getting plucked by Nattaya Boochatham, who ran over Bangladesh's lower-middle-order to restrict the Tigresses by 176 runs for eight wickets in 50 overs.

Bangladesh got off to a flying start in the World Cup qualifiers beating Pakistan and USA in the first two matches. Bangladesh will face Zimbabwe on their fourth match in the campaign.

17 years after a spark, age-old problems still persist

BISHWAJIT ROY

Bangladesh have their backs against the wall following a poor display in the shortest format of the game and they will be desperate to gain something positive from the two-match Test series against Pakistan, starting from today at the Zahir Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong, to dissipate the gloom surrounding Bangladesh cricket.

There has been hardly anything positive associated with the Tigers in recent times and against such a backdrop, many can recall memories of 2004, especially now that the Tigers are in the port city in search of a positive vibe.

The entire scenario may not be the same, but at that time cricket fans in the country wept while the rest of the world ridiculed our cricket and our players. Suddenly, a young batter burst onto the scene with a spectacular unbeaten 158 against visiting India and showed what they were capable of if they played to their potential.

Will anyone from Mominul Haque's side be able to revive a similarly sweet memory when they play the first Test against a formidable Pakistan?

There are some similarities to what happened 17 years ago. It seemed that everything was ugly in our cricket then. Times have changed and now our expectations are totally different from 2004. But what is still missing in our cricket... I believe excitement and a classy innings or showing fighting spirit can change the whole complexion," said none other than Mohammad Ashraful, who single-handedly earned respect for his country through that magical three-figure innings.

"We have some exciting talents. Especially when I saw the Under-19 players in the first-class competition, I was just amazed. We have a player like Liton [Das], who has the ability to change the whole scenario [of a game]. I am still searching for an answer about why selectors dropped him

from the T20 squad. Whatever the popular sentiment is, the team management should understand that players like Liton and Soumya [Sarkar] are assets for the team and we should create an environment for them to express themselves," he continued.

After 17 years, Ashraful, however, wanted to focus on the bigger picture.

"Pakistan are a very strong team but still we may make some mark on the Test series. It will not solve our problems because we are still lagging behind in providing good platforms that our talented

seat in the face of international assignments.

"Although we expect a good showing in Test cricket against a team like Pakistan, hardly anybody noticed that we just completed one of our first-class competitions on very poor wickets where one cannot expect young talents flourish. Just think, it was hard to even raise the ball above ankle height in the first over and Sumon bhai also saw how poor the wickets were," the Barishal Division batter said.

"The irony is that we are still crying for good performances from



young players could use to prepare themselves for bigger challenges. There is a young wicketkeeper-batter, Pritom Kumar from Rajshahi Division, and he is an exciting talent. His backlift is like KL Rahul's. I even told Sumon bhai (selector Habibul Bashar) to take care of him. But again, will our system give him the opportunity to flourish?"

Ashraful pointed out that another perennial problem facing Bangladesh cricket takes a back

the national team and also crying for good domestic competitions like we did in 15 to 20 years back. Individual brilliance may not solve anything," he added.

Ashraful's description may be substantiated by the fact that even batter Mohammad Mithun became a 'deadly bowler' during his spell of 20.5-2-75-7.

So, whatever happens in Chattogram or Mirpur, we might still be left crying for a proper cricketing structure.



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No trust and not much of a process either

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

ICC's new Test Championship cycle begins for Bangladesh today with the first Test against Pakistan at Chittagong and it also introduces the beginning of a jam-packed Test schedule through to the end of 2022 for the Tigers.

However, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) are far from ready for the upcoming challenges, pegged down by imminent absences of star players alongside a dearth of players in the pipeline and an environment of distrust filtering down from the hierarchy through to the team management and then down to the players and support staff.

The recent World Cup debacle may have brought T20 credentials back in sharp focus but Tests remain the ultimate assessment of cricketing growth.

There was a time that this country as a whole clamoured for Test status but having failed to capitalise on established players' contributions, the pipeline of players in the format is running thin.

The Pakistan Tests will be a big challenge, but not the only one as consequent series featuring 12 Tests through to end of 2022 will call a lot of team management and its plans.

Take the case of absentee seniors for instance. According to BCB sources, ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan remains unlikely for the upcoming tour of New Zealand while opener Tamim Iqbal's injury rule him out until the tour of Sri Lanka in May.



There are doubts among management over the seriousness of their injuries, which shows a lack of trust in the environment.

Mahmudullah Riyad's Test retirement put the BCB's plans in further stress ahead of a jam-packed schedule.

"We don't have enough players," a BCB higher-up said on conditions of anonymity. With so many assignments coming up, injury management will be an issue too.

When going into a series, the head coach's authority and direction is of utmost importance but sources also confirmed a serious lack of trust between seniors and the head coach.

A look at a training session can further confirm the scenario and sources confirm the BCB is looking for a high-profile coach to replace Russell Domingo.

"The players are the main stakeholders, and if they don't listen to the coach, we need solutions," another BCB higher-up said on conditions of anonymity.

Domingo, even as he is with the team, is not really part of the group at this point and it is likely that his contract of two years may be absolved with compensation.

Even as Khaled Mahmud's appointment as team director came haphazardly, the BCB wants to continue his tenure for a year but without due process, a lack of result can see his position questioned in near future.

Most importantly, the culmination of all the above factors, given a lack of trust and the absences of stalwarts, leads the BCB to think 'what else could go wrong?' as the new cycle commences.