

No easy path for OPENING HOPEFULS



SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh's opening pair has proven their most vulnerable link in recent times across formats and the curious case is set to continue with the Tigers set to field the fifth different opening pair in seven Tests this year when they meet Pakistan in the second game of their two-match Test series in Mirpur today.

The latest episode of the muddled modus operandi was a maiden call-up for opener Naim Sheikh for the second Test, which follows a comprehensive eight-wicket defeat in Chattogram for the hosts.

The left-hander attended his first nets session for the Test team at the outer nets in Mirpur yesterday but looked shaky from the start and frustrated batting coach Ashwell Prince. The left-hander was recalled by Prince midway through the batting session after trying to play an upper cut to a short delivery from Rejaur Rahman Raja.

Chief selector Minhajul Abedin earlier opined that Naim, who played his last first-class cricket match three years back, was picked for his 'international experience'.

The decision also seems harsh on Naim, who was called suddenly and with hardly any preparation, and it seemed obvious the left-hander would endure a tough time adjusting to the demands of Test cricket.

All eyes will again be on the opening slots, but the question that remains is who will open the innings alongside Shadman Islam after opener Saif Hasan -- who had a terrible time with the bat in the first Test -- was diagnosed with typhoid.

Following the rather disappointing nets session, a lack of confidence in Naim may again put the think-tank in a dilemma.

Mahmudul Hasan Joy, another young top-order batsman who also got a maiden Test call-up, is among the contenders to replace Saif, but it was learned that left-handed Najmul Hossain Shanto may open the innings alongside Shadman for the second Test.

Najmul, who was dismissed for a duck in the second innings of the first Test, showed promise during a brief stay in the first innings when he made 14. The 23-year-old has been in good touch in the longest format, usually coming in at number three, and has scored two centuries in his last four Tests.

But it will be a mammoth challenge against a top-quality Pakistan pace bowling attack, which feature the likes of Shaheen Afridi and Hasan Ali -- who both claimed five-wicket hauls in Chattogram.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Shakib returns, but not quite in earnest

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The way Shakib Al Hasan practiced at the training facilities in Mirpur yesterday gave the appearance that the premier all-rounder was making up for all the time he had to spend outside the field.

The southpaw was engaged in a day-long training session after recovering from a hamstring injury that he picked up midway through the T20 World Cup, forcing him to miss the three-match T20I series and the first Test against Pakistan.

Although the Bangladesh team were scheduled to start their training from 1:30pm, Shakib arrived around 11:00am and while awaiting his Covid-19 test results -- a pre-requisite to entering the bio-bubble and practicing with the squad -- he practiced batting against net bowlers at the indoor facilities for more than two hours.

After receiving a negative test as expected, the 34-year-old all-rounder entered the bio-bubble and joined the squad. It seemed the all-rounder was mainly focused on batting, knocking around bowlers for a while in the nets during the team practice as well.

Shakib then ran about three rounds of the main ground before bowling a few deliveries to teammate Mushfiqur Rahim, who was practicing his patented sweeps.

His approach to training signaled that the champion all-rounder was gearing up for a return to the squad and it goes without saying that his inclusion will help the Tigers' balance the squad after an eight-wicket thumping in Chattogram.

With Shakib fit, Bangladesh are certain to make changes to the squad that started in the port city. A change in the opening slot is another certainty after Saif Hassan

was ruled out after being diagnosed with typhoid.

Bangladesh included Mohammad Naim in the squad but it is unlikely that the left-hander, who has always been considered for T20s and has only played six first-class matches, will get the nod. The other candidate for the opening slot alongside regular Shadman Islam is the uncapped Mahmudul Hasan Joy, who was included in the squad for the first Test as a back-up opener.

It is more likely that the team management will opt for to tinker with the batting line-up, perhaps promoting Najmul Hossain Shanto from number three to the opening position in order to effectively help accommodate Yasir Ali, who had a promising debut in the Chattogram Test.

There might be another change in the pace department which could see Abu Jayed, who had an ordinary outing in the first Test, make way for Taskin Ahmed, who has returned after recovering from a finger injury.

While there are set to be a few changes for the second Test, starting tomorrow in Mirpur, one thing that is certain is that Bangladesh will have a much more balanced side with Shakib's inclusion ensuring the ideal blend of five bowlers and seven batters.

However, what might be a worry for the team management is how long the side will have such perfect balance. Although no one from the BCB was willing to comment officially, it was learned that Shakib has still not confirmed his availability for the upcoming New Zealand tour, for which the Tigers are set to fly in just six days.

Black Caps eye elusive series win in India

AGENCIES

India captain Virat Kohli's return after a well-earned break couldn't have come in a more unenviable setting as he needs to tread the fine line between tough and prudent in his selection calls when India take on New Zealand in the second and final Test at the rain-soaked 'Maximum City' from today.

After an anti-climactic end to the first Test where New Zealand escaped with a creditable draw defying the Indian spinners on a slow turner, the home team under its regular captain would certainly go for a slight rejig in the combination.

Also, at the Wankhede, the hosts may only get four days to enforce a positive result due to heavy rains that could be a dampener on day one and the underlying moisture which will also bring an extra Black Caps pacer Neil Wagner into the equation.

In Kohli's absence, Mumbai batter Shreyas Iyer made a dream test debut with

a first-innings 105 followed by a crucial 65 in the second in Kanpur.

Calls have grown to drop either Ajinkya Rahane, who led India in Kanpur, or Cheteshwar Pujara - both of whom have been short of runs - to vacate a spot for Kohli and allow Iyer to retain his place.

Unseasonable rain in Mumbai has also meant that both teams have not been able to practise outdoors since Wednesday and the weather conditions could have an impact on the team selection, according to Kohli.

New Zealand have never won a Test series in India, let alone a test match since the 1988-89 tour.

The top-ranked Black Caps, who beat India in a June contest in Southampton to win the inaugural World Test Championship, have a chance to make history with a win in Mumbai.

"We gained a lot out of our efforts in Kanpur," New Zealand's pace spearhead Tim Southee said. "We're just looking forward to a new challenge here in Mumbai."

Protocols relaxed for New Zealand tour

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The quarantine protocols for Bangladesh for their upcoming two-Test tour of New Zealand, part of the World Test Championship (WTC), will be more relaxed compared to the measures the Tigers had to endure on their previous tour of the nation in March-April this year.

"We will have more relaxed quarantine protocols than we had on our last tour of New Zealand. We will need to stay quarantined in our room for three to four days. After that, players need to stay in their quarantine centre for a further three to four days," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury told media yesterday.

The Tigers had to undergo a very strict 14-day quarantine period the last time they toured New Zealand. The Tigers could also not take part in any practice games on that tour.

However, the Tigers will be able to participate in two warm-up fixtures on their upcoming tour.

"We are getting a few added opportunities on this tour. Our team will get the opportunity to play two two-day practice games, one between themselves and the other against a New Zealand XI. After that we will play the Test series," added Nizamuddin.



SRI LANKA IN FIRM CONTROL

An outstanding hundred by Dhananjaya de Silva (153 not out) put Sri Lanka back in control of the second Test against the West Indies as they finished day four at Galle on 328-8 yesterday. De Silva and Lasith Embuldeniya's ninth-wicket partnership yielded a record 107 runs as they batted through the final session of the day. The West Indies trail by 279, 11 more than the highest ever successful run chase at Galle.

PHOTO: AFP



New Zealand captain Kane Williamson (L) speaks with teammates Tom Latham and Ross Taylor ahead of the second Test against India. PHOTO: AFP

'Yasir, you must work hard'

After a prolonged time spent with the national squad, Yasir Ali finally earned his much-awaited Test debut for Bangladesh in the first of the two-match Test series against Pakistan. And as the match was staged in Chattogram, Yasir had the opportunity to make a dream start in Test cricket at his hometown. "It was challenging," Yasir stated. "I've been with the team for so long but couldn't play matches. But I always motivated myself by saying: Yasir, you must work hard, so that you can utilise the opportunity when you get it," he added.



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