

## Cricketers victim-blamed over pitch issue

SPORTS REPORTER

Behaviour of the typical low and slow pitches in Bangladesh have been on the receiving end of a barrage of criticism, and remained near the centre of discussion among players.

The poor nature of surfaces had raised fingers on the curators and their ability to produce sporting pitches was repeatedly questioned. The Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, especially, brought Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) head curator Gamini de Silva under the radar of scrutiny as the Sri Lankan has been in charge for some time now.

Interestingly, the chairman of the BCB's grounds committee and influential board director Mahbubul Anam, who was in Chattogram ahead of the ODI series against Afghanistan, pointed fingers at the cricketers and defended the curators instead, saying that good players can score runs on all surfaces.

"When questions arise over lack of runs on the pitch, I think the problem is on the players and not the pitch. Those who can play well are able to



score runs in all sorts of pitches," Mahbubul told the media yesterday.

"Cricket is a game of uncertainty, which comes through the pitches, and there won't be any excitement if it was absent," the BCB director added while reiterating that the onus is on the players to 'develop their skills in different pitches' as the 'behaviour of the pitch depends on the weather'.

However, Mahbubul ended up mentioning that Chattogram has always produced sporting tracks and the upcoming three ODIs at the port city will have everything for a good cricketing contest.



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Following a long gap of over seven months since Bangladesh played their last ODI series against Zimbabwe in July last year, the Tigers ODI captain Tamim Iqbal is set to return to international stage with the upcoming three-match ODI series against Afghanistan, starting from tomorrow.

A finger injury after that Zimbabwe series led to Tamim missing in action in five Tests and 24 T20Is for the Tigers up until now. It surely became the longest inactive period, during which Tamim had to remain out of international cricket, ever since the dashing lefty made his debut for Bangladesh back in 2007.

Criticisms over his batting approach in the shortest format of the game played a role in Tamim opting to stay out of the ICC World T20 World Cup selection and last month, the 32-year-old announced his decision to continue his break from T20Is for another six months.

Although Tamim was reluctant to clarify the exact reason behind his sabbatical from T20Is, sources close to the cricketer confirmed that the experienced batter did not take the criticism over his batting approach lightly.

Tamim, however, went on to display his class in the recently-concluded Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League.

He remained among the top three run-getters in the tournament, scoring 407 runs in nine games with a strike rate of 132.57, striking a hundred and four fifties.

So, all eyes will be on Tamim as he makes a comeback to national colours in the favoured ODI format after an extended pause. Given the type of character Tamim

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has showcased over the years, it is safe to assume that the highest run-getter for the Tigers across all formats will be hungrier than ever.

Interestingly, many might have forgotten that Tamim scored a hundred in his last international game in Zimbabwe, during

the third ODI in Harare, as Bangladesh whitewashed the hosts and clinched the series 3-0 under his leadership.

The upcoming three-match series against Afghanistan is somewhat a new beginning for Tamim but the fact is the experienced campaigner has very little to prove as a batter.

Whereas, on the leading front, it will be a big challenge for Tamim, who took over the ODI captaincy last year from Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. Since then, the Tigers lost to New Zealand in the three-match series but went on to seal series victories against Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe under Tamim's captaincy.

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It is not just because of Mashrafe's performance as a captain on the field but also the legacy that the talismanic cricketer has left as a leader off the field, something Tamim would be aware of.

But then again, for someone like Tamim, it will be important for the left-hander to enjoy his comeback in the national colours more as a batter, so that the Tigers benefit and grow stronger as a team under his leadership.

## Munim rewarded for BPL performance

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National selectors, led by Minhajul Abedin, wasted no time in bringing in young opener Munim Shahriar to the national side as the right-hander was included in the 14-member squad for the upcoming two-match T20I series against Afghanistan.

Munim showed glimpses of his talent during the recently-concluded Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) by providing Fortune Barishal several flying starts, the likes of which the selectors have been searching for some time now.

And it was none but Bangladesh premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan who praised the 23-year-old opener, terming him as a future prospect. With one fifty in six games, Munim scored 178 runs at a staggering strike rate of 152.13.

The selectors also recalled another uncapped batsman Yasir Ali Rabbi, who was impressive in the BPL for Khulna Tigers, scoring 219 runs in 11 matches with a strike rate of 139.49.

Top-order batters Najmul Hossain Shanto, Saif Hasan, all-rounder Shamim Hossain Patwary, wicketkeeper-batters Nurul Hasan Sohan and Akbar Ali and leg-spinner Aminul Islam Biplob are the six players who have been dropped from the previous squad that featured against Pakistan towards the end of last year.

Both matches of the T20I series against Afghanistan will be played in Mirpur on March 3 and 5, respectively, following the completion of the three-match ODI series in Chattogram.

**SQUAD:** Mahmudullah Riyad (Captain), Liton Das, Munim Shahriar, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Afif Hossain, Sheikh Mahedi Hasan, Yasir Ali Chowdhury, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Shoriful Islam, Nasum Ahmed, Shohidul Islam and Naeem Sheikh.



## BOA planning long-term training

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Bangladesh Olympic Association (BOA) is planning to run a long-term training camp by emphasising on individual disciplines, which will be featured in July-August's Commonwealth Games, August's Islamic Solidarity Games and September's Asian Games this year and the 2023 South Asian Games.

Although the training is going to be organised as part of preparation for the three Games, the ultimate target of BOA is to produce better results in the SA Games, which are supposed to take place in Pakistan in early 2023.

"We are thinking of starting the training for individual disciplines from early March, so that the athletes can produce good results in the 2023 South Asian Games though they will also take part in three more Games this year. Nothing has been finalised yet as the technical and training committee will place its proposals within a couple of days before the BOA secretary general for approval," said a technical and training committee member, seeking anonymity.

Bangladesh will participate in athletics, swimming, boxing, gymnastics and wrestling in the Commonwealth Games before taking part in 11 disciplines in the Islamic Solidarity Games.

Though Asian Games will feature 42 sports, Bangladesh will then go on to take part in 17 disciplines, out of the 42 featured, in the Asian Games.

## Tuchel fights to rekindle Chelsea fire

Villarreal welcome Juventus

AFP, London

Thomas Tuchel admits Chelsea are fighting to "survive" as the spluttering Champions League holders prepare to face Lille in the last 16 first leg tonight.

Tuchel's side have won their last five games in all competitions, but there was little joy on the German's face when he reflected on Saturday's 1-0 victory at Crystal Palace.

The honeymoon is definitely over for Tuchel as he approaches the business end of his first full season as Chelsea boss.

In just five months in charge last term, Tuchel led Chelsea to the Champions League crown and the FA Cup final, as well as a top four finish in the Premier League.

When Romelu Lukaku was signed from Inter Milan for a club record £97 million (\$131 million), it was expected the Belgian striker would help Chelsea enjoy a period of sustained dominance.

Chelsea were tipped to emerge as serious challengers for the Premier League title and in the early weeks of this season it seemed they might live up to the hype.

But in the grip of a windswept winter in Britain, Tuchel has found it increasingly tricky to keep Chelsea from being blown off course. The first signs of discontent behind the scenes emerged when Lukaku went public with complaints about the way

he was being deployed by Tuchel.

Forced to apologise, Lukaku has cut a disconsolate figure ever since and remains without a league goal since December.

Lukaku was completely anonymous against Palace and had only seven touches — the lowest by a player over 90 minutes since Opta started recording the statistic in 2003-04.

That victory at Palace was only Chelsea's third in their last nine league games, a dismal run that effectively shattered their title hopes. Chelsea are 13 points behind leaders Manchester City, making retaining the Champions League their main goal for the rest of the season.

Meanwhile, Juventus made a splash in the January transfer window when they snatched hot prospect Dusan Vlahovic and Switzerland midfielder Denis Zakaria, but their arrival has yet to provide the hoped-for boost ahead of Tuesday's Champions League visit to Villarreal.

Massimiliano Allegri's side travel to Spain as the only Italian side with a realistic hope of making the last eight after Inter Milan were beaten 2-0 at the San Siro by Liverpool on Wednesday.

However they go into the first leg of their last 16 tie in unsure form, with results and above all performances that have left fans unsatisfied with Allegri's first season back in black and white.



After bagging the Club World Cup title recently, defending champions Chelsea will be full of confidence when they host Lille in a Champions League last-16 first-leg clash tonight. (Inset) Meanwhile, Dusan Vlahovic will want to show his prowess on the European stage when Juventus travel to Villarreal.

PHOTO: TWITTER