

'We were few runs short'

SPORTS REPORTER

Fazalhaq Farooqi remained an unknown figure even when he took part in the recently concluded Bangladesh Premier League for Minister Group Dhaka as he managed to play just three games before being dropped from the side.

The 21-year-old, however, made his presence felt against Bangladesh yesterday. In what is only his second ODI, he rattled through the Tigers batting line-up with his swing and pace while defending a small total of 215 runs posted by his side in the first ODI in Chattogram.

Courtesy of Farooqi's magnificent bowling upfront, the Tigers were reeling on 45 for 6 at one point before Afif Hossain Dhrubo and Mehedi Hasan Miraz's record unbeaten 174-run stand helped the hosts to stun the visitors and Bangladesh won by four wickets.

The cricketer, from the Baghlan province in Afghanistan, gave full credit to the two Bangladeshi batters Afif and Miraz despite at one stage Afghanistan were eyeing an easy win.

"Initially, there was some movement off the surface and we managed to deliver our best in the initial stage of the innings," Farooqi told the media yesterday.

"But as the innings progressed, the wickets started to turn better for batting. And at the same time, they also had a good partnership in the middle, which proved to be the turning point of the game."

"We were a few runs short according to the wicket. If we had 240 plus, that would have been a good total," said the Afghan pacer.

The left-arm quick, who idolises the likes of Mitchell Johnson, Zaheer Khan, and Mohammad Amir, was even called up as the net bowler for Chennai Super Kings in the IPL.

Farooqi said in the end that the pressure of international cricket is way different from playing franchise cricket.

"When you play franchise cricket, you play as an individual. But when you play for the country, you are the representative of your nation."

AFIF, MEHEDI prevail with nerves of steel

ABDULLAH AL MEHEDI from Chattogram

"We don't ever think about whether a player is young or a senior. Whenever we play, we try to contribute as members of the team," Afif Hossain said in yesterday's post-match press conference when asked whether he or Mehedi Hasan Miraz felt they had a point to prove as they staged an astonishing turnaround yesterday from an impossible situation and took Bangladesh to a four-wicket win in the first ODI against Afghanistan.

The scenario and the remark afterwards was uncanny because of the confidence from both batters out there yesterday. It was curious from a cricket culture point of view as well.

After Afghanistan succumbed late in their innings, losing their last five wickets for just 21 runs to post 215 all-out, Bangladesh would have been patting themselves on the back.

What followed as Bangladesh started their chase was nothing short of a disaster. Experienced heads struggled to counter the early swing from Fazaalhaq Farooqi as Liton Das, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and debutant Yasir Ali departed to the seamer.

Shakib Al Hasan and Mahmudullah being at the crease meant the Tigers could hold on to some hope but that did not last long as Mujeeb Ur Rahman and Rashid Khan respectively accounted for their wickets, leaving Bangladesh at 45 for six in the 12th over. From that point, it appeared an insurmountable task as number eight batter Mehedi joined Afif, who came in at number seven.



Bangladesh's depth in the lower middle-order is often celebrated but has not created much in reality during key moments in the past. But with 170 runs required from just over 39 overs, even the most ardent Bangladesh fan could not have foreseen what was to follow.

Guts, fitness, class and finesse were on show during Miraz's 120-ball 81 and Afif's 115-ball 93. The pair stitched together an unbroken 174-run seventh-wicket stand. Before this, Afif had just one fifty in international cricket.

However, the mental reservoir of patience and self-belief shown, especially by two youngsters not considered established stars, to take responsibility and see the side out of trouble was an assertion of nerves of steel from the new generation.

The likes of Shakib, Tamim, Riyad, Mushfiqur and others had that air of belief when they came onto the international cricket scene. That asset has been missing in the recent past from youngsters looking to make the same journey. By the time Shakib or Tamim had become seniors, a

certain culture of subjugation towards senior figures was often apparent. It perhaps happens because seniors perform better but having a culture where a younger player always feels they can pass on responsibilities can also affect motivation and professionalism.

A nervy Bangladesh was however watching on as Miraz and Afif countered some of the best spinners in the world, playing them on merit. There were hardly any rash shots, none from Afif at least. Miraz's sweep against Nabi in the 35th over caught the edge but luckily missed the stumps and the wicketkeeper.

Afif did not bother with any loose deliveries either, flicking a Yamin Ahmadzai delivery for six when the opportunity arrived. When he found it difficult, Miraz took over and found boundaries.

"The innings is special because it came against world class bowlers," Afif reiterated at press conference, their ploy being to see out the Afghan spin trio. In the end, at least from Bangladesh cricket's point of view, it was more than that. It was about taking responsibility. Not seniors or juniors but a changing of the dynamics.



Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Afif Hossain Dhrubo at the centre of attention as the senior players euphorically converge to the unlikely heroes, who stitch a partnership for the ages to rescue the Tigers from the brink of defeat in the first ODI of the three-match series in Chattogram yesterday. [Above] Earlier, the Tigers' three pacers walk off to the pavilion after a job well done. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'We were willing to stay as long as we could'

SPORTS REPORTER

When a side is six down for just 45 in chase of 215 runs, perhaps not many would hope that they could go on to win the game without losing any more wickets. Even skipper Tamim Iqbal opined during the post-match presentation that he did not expect Bangladesh to win the first ODI against Afghanistan from that situation.

But what mattered most was the belief from the two youngsters, Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Afif Hossain, who played their best ODI knocks and stitched a Bangladesh record 174-run unbeaten seventh-wicket stand to ensure a memorable win.

Afif made 93 after hitting his maiden ODI fifty while Miraz struck just his second fifty and was unbeaten on 81. The 174 runs partnership was

Afif Hossain and Mehedi Miraz's unbroken 174-run seventh-wicket stand was the largest partnership for any team who lost six wickets under fifty runs in ODIs.



SCORES IN BRIEF

AFGHANISTAN:

215 all out in 49.1 overs (Najibullah 67, Rahmat 34; Mustafizur 3-35, Taskin 2-55, Shakib 2-50, Shoriful 2-38)

BANGLADESH:

219 for 6 in 48.5 overs (Afif 93 not out, Mehedi 81 not out, Farooqi 4-50, Rashid 1-30)

RESULT: Bangladesh won by 4 wickets. Player-of-the-match: Mehedi Hasan Miraz.

also the highest from players on any team in ODI history in a winning effort after they had lost the first six wickets for 50 or fewer runs.

But as he walked to the press conference after the game yesterday, Afif's demeanour was the same as it was during the high-pressure chase: calm and composed.

"The plan after losing six wickets was to not give away any more wickets. We were batting according to the plan. We never bothered about runs. We were willing to stay at the crease as long as we could. During the latter stages, when the equation was run-a-ball, our plan was to play our normal game."

There was a lot of talk about the need to strategise for the Afghan spin threat, which features the likes of Rashid Khan, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, and Mohammad Nabi. According to Afif, the plan was not to give the spinners any wickets and take the game deep, something they managed to do successfully.

Afif also credited Miraz, saying they never spoke about winning the game during their partnership and only looked to play on till the end.

"Miraz bhai provided good support from the other end. Whenever we required boundaries, he got them. We had good communication out in the middle and we realised that if we did not give them a wicket then it was possible to win the game. But we never spoke about winning the game; we tried to play till the end and not give away our wickets," he said.

Abahani edge past MSC

SPORTS REPORTER

Title contenders Abahani handed a 1-0 defeat to their archrivals Mohammedan Sporting Club in their first home match of the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League at the Sylhet District Stadium yesterday.

Abahani's defensive midfielder Sohail Rana Jr. separated the two sides with a 27-minute strike in the so-called 'Dhaka derby', which was held outside Dhaka for the second time since the country's two perennial foes locked horns in Cumilla last season.

With four victories so far, the six-time champions Abahani regained the lead in the 12-team table with 12 points from five matches, just one point ahead of defending champions Bashundhara Kings and

hand, tasted their first defeat in the ongoing league to slip to the fifth position, with eight points from five matches.

The return of midfield maestro Raphael Augusto was a huge relief

let loose a stunner from outside the box to beat Mohammedan goalkeeper Mohammad Sujan.

Afterwards, the home side created at least three more chances to extend the lead but Abahani



for Abahani, who were missing four regular players including Brazilian goal-machine Dorielton Gomes.

From the get-go, both teams looked charged up as the referee had to book two players each from both sides within the first five minutes.

Abahani enjoyed superior ball possession in the match and took the lead in the 27th minute. Daniel Colindres provided from the left flank to Nabib Newaj Jibon, who in turn had cut it back for Rana, who

forwards fell short while brave goalkeeping from Sujan denied the Sky Blues.

Mohammedan could hardly penetrate Abahani backline except for a single move, in which Abahani keeper Shahidul Alam Sohail tipped over a goal-bound free-kick from Nigerian Obi Moneke.

Abahani now lead their perennial foes Mohammedan 12-5 on head-to-head since the professional football league began in 2007.



Chelsea showed they can thrive without Romelu Lukaku as Kai Havertz scored after replacing the axed Belgium striker for the 2-0 Champions League last-16, first-leg win against Lille on Tuesday. Thomas Tuchel's side took control of the tie thanks to Havertz's first-half header and Christian Pulisic's clinical finish after the break at Stamford Bridge. [Inset] Dusan Vlahovic scored the second-fastest goal ever (33 seconds) for a Champions League debutant as Juventus were held to a 1-1 draw at Villarreal in a last-16 first-leg tie.

PHOTO: TWITTER



Mohammedan could hardly penetrate Abahani backline except for a single move.

two points ahead of third-placed Sheikh Jamal DC, who beat Sheikh Russel 1-0 in the day's other match at the Birshreshtha Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj. Mohammedan, one the other