



Signs of life bring sliver of hope

NABID YEASIN

Bangladesh's journey to the UAE for the Asia Cup was preceded by chaos and drama. It also concluded in a dramatic fashion, with the cricketers, alongside the entire nation, left heartbroken following another agonising exit from the marquee tournament.

But there lies a subtle yet crucial difference in the two scenarios. While it seemed as if the Tigers' shambolic T20 journey had no end in sight, that does not need to be the case any longer.

It is true that the two-wicket defeat to Sri Lanka in Dubai last Thursday has left the players and fans gutted, but it also showed that intent and approach go far in the shortest format of the game.

For a long time now, all the fuss has been surrounding the dearth of power hitters in the Tigers' squad whenever the prolonged failure in T20 cricket was brought into question. While the role of power hitters is undeniable in the format of the game that demands quick transitions more than anything, it is also possible to find a way around it and achieve success.

At times, more than anything, a side can find the edge in the game through their players' bravehearted approach – the type of which was evident when a fearless Mehedi Hasan Miraz, a bowling all-rounder whose role as a batter usually stays limited to chipping in runs down the order, danced down the track and dispatched a Maheesh Theekshana delivery over long off for a six in Dubai on Thursday. Or sometimes, it is the bold yet time-appropriate decisions, like the one that skipper Shakib Al Hasan and the Bangladesh team management took by sending Miraz and Sabbir Rahman to open the innings,



that can do wonders.

Then again, at times, regardless of the bold or even the most thought-out plans, things may eventually boil down to batters down the order holding down the fort or providing the finishing touch – like Afif Hossain and Mosaddek Hossain did to see Bangladesh post a 180-plus total, something the Tigers could pile up only twice in their last 18 innings in the format.

In the two Asia Cup matches that he played, Mosaddek, in particular, got the benefits of incorporating the competitive spirit and aggressive mindset, none of which Bangladesh could portray in T20s lately.

On a day when every other Bangladeshi batter found it difficult to even find ways to get going on a slow track, it was Mosaddek's fluent and unbeaten 31-ball 48 that helped the Tigers reach a mediocre 127-run total, a score that seemed far-fetched at one point.

While keeping hold of this new-found intent and bold approach would be paramount to, at least, start making the much-needed shift in fortunes in this format for Bangladesh, however, it needs to be nurtured by isolating it from the outside influence and noise that often destroys anything good in Bangladesh cricket.

This glimpse of positive approach does not allow the team management to shrug this Asia Cup's early exit under the carpet. What it does, though, is that it acts as the catalyst to rediscover courage so that Bangladesh is able to quickly customise a stable brand of cricket in the T20Is, especially ahead of the fast-approaching T20 World Cup in Australia later this year.



PHOTO: TWITTER

After scoring a quickfire half-century against Hong Kong, India's Virat Kohli will be looking to use the confidence when they take on archrivals Pakistan in a Super 4 match of the Asia Cup in Dubai tonight. India, though, will be wary of Pakistan's bowling threat.

Kohli or Babar's time?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI FROM DUBAI

There is a certain camaraderie among the current generation of India and Pakistan players. Virat Kohli's gesture to Shaheen Afridi or Harris Rauf, and his remarks about Babar Azam all set a friendly tone. But beneath the surface, it is still an India-Pakistan clash and it still is arguably the biggest rivalry in world cricket despite the fact that the arch-nemeses only meet each other in multi-nation events. At the tip of that rivalry is the competitive wonders that are Kohli and Babar Azam.

Who is the world's best batsman? A few names would be thrown in but Kohli has proved his stature for a long time and in Babar, Pakistan have a match-winner who can thwart any opponent on his day. Much has been made of Kohli's form in recent times but in his last 13 innings, he has struck six fifties. While he was running around in a high-altitude mask on Friday, he was at ease during the endurance training. He has already notched 35 – an important knock against Pakistan in the context of that game – and an unbeaten 59, in the two innings he played in the 2022 Asia Cup. Slowly but surely, he is making his presence felt.

"The way he has performed for his country, he is a legend," Pakistan paceman Haris Rauf said at the press conference yesterday, seemingly relaxed despite terming the game as a 'pressure game'.

On the other end of the spectrum is Babar. His form had not been a worry until only recently and Pakistan would like to shrug off his slightly concerning form. The team has not played a lot of T20s this year but the Babar-Mohammad Rizwan opening partnership

would once again be Pakistan's key weapon at the top. The duo top the list of highest partnerships for Pakistan in T20Is and the T20I World Cup between the arch-rivals saw them notch a 10-wicket win with an unbroken partnership.

So would it be Kohli's night or Babar's this time around?

How Pakistan would handle the Kohli threat remains to be seen but India's batting lineup is swamped with world-class batters. The top-order in itself would be a huge threat for any side. When the two teams met in the T20 World Cup, Afridi took apart the India top-order with swing and pace. In Afridi's absence, such motivation will have to come from elsewhere in the bowling lineup and Naseem Shah was particularly impressive in the first game between the two sides despite India's five-wicket win with just two deliveries to spare.

"We were worried who would fill in with the new ball. Shaheen would invariably get early wickets. That gives me a lot of confidence when I came on to bowl. The way Naseem bowled in the last two matches, that has given me the confidence. Partnerships are important in bowling as well. I have been playing with Shaheen for a while. I used to be relaxed when Shaheen is around. But seeing Naseem, I am getting the situation I am comfortable to bowl in," Rauf said about Shaheen and Naseem yesterday.

The two teams have never made the final together despite the fact that either India or Pakistan have made the Asia Cup final every time since the culmination of the tournament in 1984. The Super 4 game awaits and so does Kohli, Babar and the other stars and it could turn out that both make the final this time around.



India's top three 'lackadaisical'

AGENCIES

Another high-octane India versus Pakistan clash is set for Sunday, as both arch-rivals look to outwit each other in the Super Four match at the ongoing Asia Cup 2022. For defending champions India, the hotly-anticipated fixture will be a chance to revamp their batting approach, which has been cautious in the Powerplay overs so far.

Neither Rohit Sharma nor Virat Kohli looked comfortable against the Pakistani attack, while KL Rahul perished for a nought. It was Hardik Pandya's one-man show that got India over the line in a thrilling last-over finish. Against Hong Kong, Suryakumar Yadav produced an incredible 68* off 26 balls to set up a crucial win.

Former India player Dooda Ganesh was blunt in his analysis as lashed out at the famed top-3 for its 'lackadaisical' batting. "Can't expect SKY and the other middle-order batsmen to bail you out every time for the top three's lackadaisical approach. High time the elephant in the room is addressed. This simply can't continue," he wrote on Twitter.

It remains to be seen if skipper Rohit and Rahul Dravid take the gamble of opening with Rishabh Pant on Sunday. Rahul looked scratchy against Hong Kong to produce his slowest ever (36 off 39 balls) innings, while Kohli showed glimpses of his old self and hit 59* off 44 balls. But the former skipper was questioned for his intent during the middle overs.

Wasim Jaffer, former Indian opener, said he was worried over lack of fluency in Kohli's innings. "I am still worried about his fluency. That fluency is still not there which we have seen before. I don't think we are witnessing fluency yet, even though he scored runs today," said Jaffer ESPNcricinfo's post-match programme.

"If anyone is scoring at a strike rate of 140 or 150 then India is in trouble. So there must be someone who needs to bat at a much greater strike rate," he added.

INDIA				PAKISTAN			
M	W	L	NR	M	W	L	NR
15	9	5	1	15	5	9	1

INDIA				PAKISTAN			
M	W	L	NR	M	W	L	NR
10	8	2	0	10	2	8	0

LAST MEETING IN T20IS: DUBAI, AUGUST 28, 2022 IN THE ONGOING ASIA CUP. INDIA WON BY 5 WICKETS.

INDIA				PAKISTAN			
HARDIK PANDYA				SHADAB KHAN			
BATTING				BATTING			
MATCHES: 68				MATCHES: 66			
RUNS: 867				RUNS: 285			
AVERAGE: 24.1				AVERAGE: 18			
SR: 145				SR: 136			
HS: 51				HS: 42			
BOWLING				BOWLING			
MATCHES: 68				MATCHES: 66			
WICKETS: 53				WICKETS: 77			
ER: 8.2				ER: 7			
SR: 19				SR: 18			
BF: 4/33				BF: 4/8			



Two fans cheer for Afghanistan ahead of Asia Cup Super 4 match against Sri Lanka at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium on Saturday. The Afghans moved into the Super 4 with two wins in two matches, including an eight-wicket win against Sri Lanka in the tournament opener.

PHOTO: AFP