

Taskin oozing with confidence

SPORTS REPORTER

While the likes of South Africa, West Indies and Sri Lanka are vying for a place in the top eight of the ODI Super League, Bangladesh find themselves in a favourable position at sixth with 120 points ahead of their series against England in March at home.

The current world champions in both white-ball formats are touring Bangladesh for the first time since 2016 and were the last side to win a bilateral series here. Tigers have won all six home ODI series they have played since then.

With the ODI World Cup coming in October, the focus is firmly on getting to the event in the best possible shape and the Tigers will also be hoping the national team stalwarts like Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim and Tamim Iqbal finish their careers with a flourish at the global event to mark their brilliant careers. The return of Sri Lankan coach Chandika Hathurusingha, who oversaw Bangladesh's most successful period, also coincides heavily with the World Cup plan.



Taskin Ahmed, the flag-bearer of Bangladesh's present pace revolution, talked to the media about Hathurusingha's return and the upcoming England series.

"We are excited that Hathurusingha is returning. He is a very good coach and an honest man. I am sure we will do well under him. Those who were young at that time have matured now and we are also in a good stead as far team is concerned," the pacer, who made his debut under Hathurusingha in 2014, said.

Taskin shared that the new coach is 'keeping in touch and sharing his plans' with the players and hoped that pacers will keep having more impact in keeping with their rise. He said that England will be a difficult opponent.

"No doubt that they are a world class team and we feel we are too. We don't want to sell ourselves short since we have won against big teams outside the country," he said.

England's previous visit had seen fiery exchanges and Taskin said there will be a good fight.

"Certainly, it won't be easy against them (England) and they are the biggest side in every format but we have the believe that we are one of the strongest sides in our own backyard and we expect to fight with them," he opined while adding that he has started his rehabilitation and will work on a plan before England's arrival.



Sylhet Strikers batters Mushfiqur Rahim and Zakir Hasan shake hands during their 90-run partnership against Khulna Tigers in their last league stage match of the BPL at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Zakir scored 50 while Rahim made 29 as Sylhet confirmed their Qualifier berth with a six-wicket victory.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Girls eye another SAFF triumph

SPORTS REPORTER

The country's football anticipates another trophy in its cabinet as Bangladesh take on Nepal in the final of the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur today.

The match will get underway at 6:00pm, local time.

Bangladesh stormed into the final of the ongoing tournament for the fourth time as the regional age group championship was held thrice in two formats: U-18 twice and U-19 once. Bangladesh emerged champions in the U-18 and the U-19 format in 2018 and 2021, respectively, before finishing runners-up behind India in U-18 round-robin format championship in 2022.

Despite the absence of a golden generation of footballers, the budding players showed their potential on their road to the final by beating Nepal 3-1, playing out a goalless draw against India before thumping Bhutan 5-0.

Bangladesh are looking forward to transforming their group-stage performance into the final. However,



Shamsunnahar Junior and Co may face a stiff challenge from the Himalayan girls who stunned pre-tournament favourites India with a come-from-behind 3-1 win to ensure a final berth.

"I think the final is going to be very competitive and a fighting one, which I believe the spectators will enjoy," said Bangladesh coach Golam Rabbani Choton during a pre-match conference at the BFF House yesterday.

Although Choton reckons the final would be tough for them, he also did not forget to mention that Bangladesh never lost to Nepal in the previous six meetings at this stage, having beaten them five

times – twice in both 2018 and 2022 editions and once in the 2023 edition – and drew once in the 2021 edition.

"Our target was to make sure of the final which we have already achieved but our job is still unfinished because we want to become champions by repeating the performance we put in our previous group-stage matches," said captain Shamsunnar, who slammed a hat-trick against Bhutan in the final round-robin fixture.

Choton will certainly bank on the forward trio – Shamsunnahar, Aklima Khatun and Shaheda Akter Ripa – to capitalise on early opportunities, and also hope to not squander clear-cut

chances like how they did against Bhutan.

"Look, the girls availed all three opportunities against Nepal in our first match but they could take only five chances home out of numerous opportunities against Bhutan. We have worked on this area in training and hope the forwards will be more clinical tomorrow [Thursday]," said Choton adding that they would devise their game strategy against Nepal accordingly, having already studied all three matches of Nepal.

Nepal coach Yam Prasad Gurung is eager to taste their maiden trophy, especially after putting up a resurgent performance against India.

"Bangladesh are ahead of us in terms of performance, home ground and crowd, but we know the weak and strong points of Bangladesh, which are our advantage. It is a different match and we will play in different ways," said Gurung.

Nepal captain Preeti Kulung Rai, however, said, "This time we will be trying to take the trophy home because we deserve to win over Bangladesh."

Balbirnie aware of 'tricky' Tigers challenge



SPORTS REPORTER

Ireland opener Andrew Balbirnie had already started assisting his national head coach with his Bangladesh experience ahead of their upcoming Bangladesh tour in March.

Their second tour in Bangladesh, having played three Dhaka ODIs in 2008, will be the first-ever all-format bilateral series between the two nations -- featuring three ODIs, three T20Is, and a Test.

"I certainly been in contact with the head coach back home and giving him the information on the different type of surfaces we are going to come and play," Balbirnie, who is one of the two Irish cricketers -- alongside Curtis Campher -- participating in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), told the media yesterday.

"Not every day you get to play in a top league (BPL) like this, at some really amazing venues," added the Khulna Tigers batter.

Ireland are set to play their maiden Test against the Tigers, and Balbirnie was reminded of the challenges that await his side in spin-friendly conditions.

"Yes, it's a bit tricky as we don't play a lot of Test matches. Probably we played our last Test three years ago back in 2019 at Lord's, which is very different from here.

"It will be tough to plan on a wicket that turns but we will find a way to compete. We know it will be super difficult but it's also exciting to come play Test in such conditions and test ourselves against the best in the world," the 32-year-old further said.

Miroslav Blazevic passes away

AFP, Zagreb

Croatia's famed football coach Miroslav Blazevic, who led the country to a third-place finish at the 1998 World Cup, died on Wednesday, the national football federation said. He was 87.

"The whole football family has lost 'the coach of all coaches' today," the federation wrote on social media.

Blazevic died in the capital Zagreb after a long fight with cancer.

Born on February 10, 1935, 'Ciro' Blazevic started his playing career in his hometown of Travnik in neighbouring Bosnia.

In the early 1960s, he began coaching in Switzerland and moved in 1979 to Croatia, which was then part of the former Yugoslavia.

In Croatia, he took over Rijeka and later Dinamo Zagreb, where he lead the club to their first Yugoslav championship in 24 years.

"Dinamo's 1982 win was the crown of my coaching career," Blazevic told local media in 2021.

From 1994 to 2000, Blazevic coached the national team and racked up a number of impressive wins, including their third place finish at the 1998 World Cup in France.

Cummins, Rohit play down pitch chatter

REUTERS, Nagpur

Rival captains Pat Cummins and Rohit Sharma sought to put the focus back on cricket after a section of Australian media accused India of selectively watering the pitch in Nagpur where the four-Test series between the sides begins on Thursday.

The pitch at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium finds itself under the spotlight even before the match starts with several Australian media pointing out that groundstaff had left the area outside left-handers' off-stump dry at both ends.

Australia's playing XI, which Cummins would not reveal, could potentially feature five left-handed batsmen in their top seven, but the paceman appeared unperturbed.

"That's part of the challenge of playing away," Cummins, whose team just need to avoid a 4-0 whitewash to make the final of the World Test Championship in June, told reporters.

"Home teams want to win at home. In Australia, we're lucky we've normally got pace and bounce.

"Home match advantage, I don't think it's a terrible thing. It's another



challenge and makes touring over here even harder when you know the conditions are custom-made for them."

Cummins said all-rounder Cameron Green, recovering from a finger injury, would miss the opener, joining pacemen Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc on the sidelines.

Australia may blood uncapped Todd Murphy alongside fellow off-spinner Nathan Lyon, and Peter Handscomb might pip Matthew Renshaw for the number six position to bring right-handed variety in their

southpaw-heavy lineup.

"I think it is a factor over here," Cummins said.

"With so much traffic from the right-handers' bowling, at times there is a bit more out there for the left-handers."

Rohit shot down suggestions that India had rolled out a 'doctored pitch' for the conTest.

"You just need to focus on the cricket that will be played on the next five days, and not worry too much about the pitch," he told a news conference.

"All 22 players who will be playing here are quality cricketers...You just got to come out and play good cricket to win the game, as simple as that."

Rohit said batters from both sides would have to think on their feet to counter spin.

"When the ball spins a lot, your method of scoring runs becomes very important," explained the opener.

"You'll have to rotate strike, and see how can you score runs - sweep, reverse sweep, using your feet ..."

"That's what we've told the boys - 'find your own ways of scoring runs'. It's going to be challenging. Australia have a couple of quality spinners who can trouble us, no doubt about that."



Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James poses for a photograph after becoming the most prolific scorer in NBA history on Tuesday, breaking a 39-year record that many throughout basketball believed would never be beaten. James, playing in his 20th season in the NBA, passed Abdul-Jabbar's longstanding total of 38,387 points after nailing a 21-foot shot late in the third quarter against the Oklahoma City Thunder.

PHOTO: AFP