



“Not just one or two players; there are quite a few from HP who played well. So, it won’t be right to point out one or two players’ names.”

Chief selector
Minhajul Abedin Nannu



Ninth time’s the charm

SABBIR HOSSAIN

Ever since its inception, the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) has had to live with the blame of failing to match its hype, mostly due to yielding fewer boundaries and high-scoring contests – the two T20 elements that are found in abundance in the most popular franchise-based competition, the Indian Premier League (IPL).

Much of the blame was placed on the extensive use of the pitches at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium (SBNS) in Mirpur. Given how worn out the surfaces become at the home of cricket due to year-round action, it is no surprise that the Chattogram and Sylhet legs have witnessed comparatively more high-scoring BPL contests over the years.

However, this year, in the ninth edition of the franchise-based tournament, Mirpur witnessed more high scores than before, especially in the early stages of the tournament. In the first phase, 152.06 runs per innings on average were registered in eight matches at the SBNS. The Chattogram phase that followed had yielded 156.29 runs per innings on average across 12 games, while Sylhet remained the venue to witness the highest number, at 161.25 runs per innings on average in eight matches.

Even though the average run-scored in Mirpur gradually dipped as the tournament progressed, with the venue averaging 142.80 runs per innings in 10 matches before the play-off stages, the surfaces garnered high praise from both players and coaches.

After securing a place in the final with a win

LOCAL STARLETS refuse sidekick roles

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

The just concluded season of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) kicked off with mixed feelings a month ago owing to the unavailability of renowned, seasoned T20 campaigners in terms of foreign recruits, and of course the inclusion of the infamous Alternate Decision Review System (ADRS).

Setting aside the comedy of errors that took place along the way and the off-field conundrums, the entertainment provided by the on-field cricket has largely received a positive response from fans and experts alike.

The pitch has undoubtedly played a big role in the positive reviews. However, at the forefront of the overall success of this BPL has been the emergence of local starlets.

The absence of big names for the most part of the tournament appeared to have come as a blessing for the up-and-coming talents as the focus was on them to deliver. And quite a few, who are in and around the national setup, have shone under the spotlight this time around.

Sylhet Strikers, who have largely dominated the

tournament from the onset, have had the luxury of having a few of those stand-out players, on the batting front. The likes of Najmul Hossain Shanto, Towhid Hridoy, and Zakir Hasan helped Sylhet to become the first team to qualify for the playoffs and to clinch a qualifier spot as well.

Shanto has made the tournament his own, amassing 452 runs at an average of 37.66, including three fifties in the 14 matches he has played leading up to the final. A strike rate of 113.85 raises a few reservations about his stats but when it came to giving his team solid starts at the top of the order, very few actually managed to do it better. The issue about Shanto’s sluggish strike-rate is nothing new in T20s as the team-highest 180 runs the southpaw accumulated in the latest edition of the T20 World Cup came at a strike rate of 114.64.

Shanto’s opening partner, Towhid Hridoy has had a stellar BPL as well. Perhaps, he has had the best outing in the tournament amongst any local player. In terms of delivering impactful, match-winning knocks, the 22-year-old has come leaps and bounds in doing justice to his talents.

The right-handed batter looked easy on the eyes and scored, portraying good reading of the game in terms of keeping the scoreboard ticking, and hitting gaps frequently. In the few instances that he felt the pressure, Hridoy showed the know-hows of weathering the storms and taking his team through troubled waters. His impressive 141.40 strike-rate, 40.30 average, and five fifties on course to scoring 403 runs are testaments to his growth as a player.

At the bowling side of things, Rangpur Riders speedster Hasan Mahmud is leading the charts for highest wicket-takers, with 17 up to the final. The 23-year-old has bowled at an economy rate of 7.98 and he knows his way around the popping crease as very few can bowl

a yorker better in the national circuit. Hasan used this attribute to good use keeping a lid on things at death.

His teammate Rakibul Hasan has also impressed. The left-arm spinner has been difficult to hit due to his immaculate understanding of length and has managed to keep his end tight, boasting an economy rate of 6.47 while picking up 11 scalps leading up to the finale.

Of the same breed is Comilla Victorians spinner Tanvir Islam, though he is not quite a new name in the competition. The 26-year-old caught the eye in the previous season as well, helping his side win the competition.

Despite missing three matches at the beginning of Comilla’s campaign, Tanvir made up ground and instantly showed what they were missing as with him in the side, Comilla won all of their matches after losing their first three contests.

Leading up to the final, Tanvir scalped 16 wickets going at just 6.31 in an over. Like Rakibul, Tanvir’s sense of length is impeccable making him hard to put away. He has taken the challenge of bowling with the new ball and has been an important factor in taking his team to the grand finale.

“We consider those who perform well and we try to provide a platform for them. There won’t be an exception this time,” national selector Habibul Bashar told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

With successive white-ball series in store against England and Ireland in the next two months, Hridoy seems most likely to have the shot at making the cut to the national T20I squad at least, considering the underwhelming form of players like Yasir Ali Chowdhury, Afif Hossain, and Soumya Sarkar, whose long-standing lean patch remains especially worrisome.

The absence of big names for the most part of the tournament appeared to have come as a blessing for the up-and-coming talents as the focus was on them to deliver. semifinals, respectively.



against Rangpur Riders on Tuesday, Sylhet Strikers captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had praised the pitch curator for his efforts.

“In matches where teams failed to score big, I think the pitches were a bit tricky. The batters will not always get a flat pitch. However, the curator, Gamini de Silva, and the Bangladesh Cricket Board [BCB] should be praised for the pitches used in this edition,” Mashrafe said.

Another unusual yet satisfying moment for this BPL was when thousands of fervent supporters flocked to the Sylhet International Stadium to support their local team, something that the tournament has not witnessed in other venues. The deafening roar that engulfed the Sylhet stadium was unlike anything witnessed in Dhaka or Chattogram.

As home and away matches have yet to be introduced in the BPL, it becomes difficult to develop a dedicated fan base for any team. Sylhet fans, however, fuelled by their team’s dominant performance, created a buzz and brought a much-needed breath of fresh air. The BCB might now be compelled to look beyond Dhaka and Chattogram to increase the tournament’s popularity.

Comilla’s recipe for success involves ‘not just money’

It came as no surprise to witness Comilla Victorians live up to their reputation in the latest Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) season.

To know more about how the franchise consistently managed to produce success, The Daily Star’s Mazhar Uddin caught up with Nafisa Kamal, the owner of the Comilla franchise, who expressed her passion and pointed out the improvement areas for the tournament, alongside a few other topics. The excerpts of the exclusive interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): Comilla Victorians are the most successful franchise in the history of BPL. As an owner, could you tell us about the motto of your team?

Nafisa Kamal (NK): I believe we have managed to create a sustainable success-pattern solely because of our team culture. From day one, it is ingrained in our players’ attitude that they belong to a team that’s not going to settle for anything less than the cup. Our slogan ‘win or win’ is a mantra that sums up our team culture.

DS: Despite the huge challenge over the availability of top foreign cricketers, Comilla managed to rope in some big names this time too. Tell us how you planned in terms of forming a balanced team?

NK: The BPL group stage fixtures had clashed with the ILT20 and SA20 leagues. As always, I am solely

responsible for the recruitment of foreign players in our team. What I did right away was break down the BPL timeline into three slots. The first slot gave us a small window before the other two leagues started. The second window was entirely limited to Pakistani players, the only ones not participating in the other 2 leagues, but they were also at the risk of leaving upon the PSL announcement. So I created the third slot just for the playoffs, this was the time when the Pakistanis would leave and other players from the ILT20 and SA20 would be available as those leagues’ group stages would end.

I remember when I approached players to sign them for my third slot, which involved the Eliminator and Final match of the BPL, they were shocked that no other team could dare to sign for the playoffs like we did. That was in October and we had already signed Sunil [Narine], Moeen [Ali] and Andre [Russell] for our playoffs in mid-February.

There’s been a lot of talk on how

we spend more than other teams on foreign players, but our foreign players are almost all repeats from previous seasons. This happens when a successful franchise has built strong relationships and loyalties with these foreign players so that both the players and their agents give us priority and consider many other factors besides money. What makes one franchise more successful with foreign players’ recruitment is not just money, it takes long-term vision, planning and courage too.

DS: Comilla started off this edition with three consecutive defeats before eventually becoming the first team to confirm the final. As an owner, how did you react to the ups and downs of the team?

NK: The first three defeats were unsettling, of course, because we were doing everything right according to plan and still not getting results. I remember, my father asked me and my sister to fly to Chittagong and give the team our support at this difficult

time. We got together with the coach, captain and all the players and support staff and shared our worries, hopes and everything that made us a team.

[Mohamad] Rizwan landed on the morning of the third defeat, after which he told us how his PSL franchise Multan Sultans turned around after six losses to become champions. I researched IPL teams that made strong comebacks after failing in the first half. We knew it has happened in history and if any team can achieve that comeback in the BPL, it’s Comilla Victorians.

DS: Considering the current context, what should be your suggestion to make the BPL more lucrative and financially viable for franchise owners?

NK: I remember being invited for tea by the BPL governing council, I remember going to BCB, to discuss my views on how to make the BPL financially viable for all the franchises involved. I also remember how after that talk over tea, the whole BPL got cancelled that year. So, I think it’s best that I keep my views on this topic to myself. I certainly don’t want the BPL to be cancelled again, especially now that the three-year agreements have been signed.

DS: Despite huge potential in the first few editions, the BPL gradually

lost its charm compared to the other franchise leagues. What is the reason behind this and your suggestion to turn things around again?

NK: I won’t comment on whether the BPL is the second-best franchise after the IPL, as we are told, but I will say that we do have the second-biggest market after the IPL. Unfortunately, we have not been able to tap into that potential yet.

Look at the ILT20, each team had nine overseas players, with two locals per team. There’s hardly any genuine passion or crowd involvement. It’s quite a manufactured tournament with no ICC recognition. Look at the PSL, the currency stands at 1 USD to 260 Pakistani rupees. At the SA20, the franchises are all held by foreign owners, and the Lanka Premier league is played in front of empty stands. I am pointing out all the shortcomings of these other leagues because we still do have an upper hand over them.

Every year we are investing 15 to 20 crores on a tournament where we should be important stakeholders. So far we have not had any formal meeting with the BPL governing council and without going into further details, I think for now that should be the starting point to develop the BPL.

