

## A heightened sense of ownership

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

“Watch it” and “ball” were some of the calls that went around the western gallery as reporters looked out for incoming stray balls during a range hitting session yesterday at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram.

Shakib Al Hasan was leading the pack, ‘his’ pack, and played coach. It became clear that he felt more of a sense of ownership with regards to the team than ever.

In the morning a day ahead of the opening T20I against England, the Tigers found an exuberant Shakib giving youngsters tips and tactical information in his own way.

He was seen working with spinners Nasum Ahmed and Tanvir Islam, showing them grips and steps to the bowling crease.

When he crossed paths with all-rounder Afif Hossain, known mainly for his batting, Shakib said: “Mama, you will be bowling tomorrow.”

As head coach Chandika Hathurusingha watched intently at the nets, Liton Das and Rony Talukdar finished their sessions and joined Shakib at one of the wickets out in the centre.

The premier all-rounder brought to attention the movement of the back leg, opining it would help Rony and Liton get under deliveries better.

Soon, a competition began in the centre with six batters lining up, playing one delivery each and rotating.

Najmul Hossain Shanto, Rony, Liton, Towhid Hridoy and Afif had one mission under Shakib: to hit the ball over the boundary ropes.

Only completing the task allowed them to stay on and play another delivery.

Shakib was vibrant, joking around with the batters who might all feature tomorrow.

When a hit from Shakib barely reached over the ropes, the others started arguing whether it was not a six. To that, Shakib comically retorted to raucous laughter: “It’s a six. Shanto said so at first.”

Shanto and Liton got the skipper off strike, but Shakib soon cleared the ropes, celebrating with hands up in the air.

From talking to Afif about the job he may have to do to instructing Rony and Liton, it was a vibrant session. It was a show of confidence in a way that a young squad enjoys.

There is no Mahmudullah Riyad or Mushfiqur Rahim in the side any more and the keys are firmly in Shakib’s hands.

He is the top gun with inspiring performances, even in the third ODI against England.

With Hathurusingha still in observation mode, it is also time to ‘watch it’ in terms of Shakib’s leadership with his pack and a new beginning.



Shakib Al Hasan was leading from the front, quite literally, as he gave his young teammates a few tips of hitting the ball and then in bowling during a practice session at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium where Bangladesh will take on world champions England (bottom) in the first match of a three-match T20I series today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## T20 series first step in journey towards 2024 WC

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI from Chattogram

England were looking forward to a challenge but for newly-arrived Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha, it will be the first step on a journey to the 2024 World Cup in the West Indies and USA.

Bangladesh will take on England in the first of the three-match T20I series at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram today after the three-match ODI series ended 2-1 in the visitors’ favour. The series will move to Dhaka for the second and third T20Is.

While the Tigers have played five bilateral ODI series against the current world champions, the T20I series will be the first series between the two nations in the shortest format.

It will also be the first series both teams will feature in since the T20 World Cup last year in Australia. Overall, it will only be the second meeting between the sides in the T20I format.

Hathurusingha came to the press conference yesterday, although T20I skipper Shakib Al Hasan was expected. With the practice session preceding the press conference being the first official T20I practice session for the Sri Lankan coach, he felt some of the personnel was still new to him.



“I have only seen the T20 team today [Wednesday]. It is just the start of a journey to the 2024 World Cup. A lot of water will go under the bridge between now and then. This is again an observation to see what we have, what areas the players can improve on, and play to our strengths,” Hathurusingha said yesterday.

There are a few newcomers in the Bangladesh squad. Towhid Hridoy and Tanvir Islam impressed selectors with their BPL performances this season. Hridoy struck over 400 runs and finished as the third-highest run-getter in the tournament while Tanvir bagged 17 wickets.

Rony Talukdar too was rewarded for his BPL performances. He has been away from the national set-up for eight years, having played a

sole T20I in 2015, that too batting at No. 7.

Shamim Hossain is another inclusion. He last played in November 2021, before being dropped.

Apart from getting a feel for the talent in the side, the series for Hathurusingha will be about shedding light on the gap between England and the Bangladesh side.

“I look forward to seeing them in match situations. I am impressed with what I have seen in the nets,” Hathurusingha said of the new faces.

“I have seen Rony before. I remember he played one game against South Africa. I can’t remember if he got injured or some other people started doing well. I am actually very interested to see what he can do. They have done well in domestic cricket so it is an

opportunity for them to put their hands up. I think they will get a lot of opportunities to show what they can do. My message to them today was to do what they normally do on the international stage,” he said of giving them a license to express themselves.

“We are in the entertainment business so we want runs. That’s why people come to watch cricket. I know the public wants to see runs and for us to win games in the 20th over. We get a lot of TV viewers. Sponsors like that too,” he added on whether big runs were expected in T20Is.

For England’s Chris Woakes, the conditions in Bangladesh were a challenge he was excited to take on.

“Relatively slow surface, I’d imagine,” Woakes said of the wicket. Hathurusingha, meanwhile, expected the wicket to behave similarly to the third ODI.

Bangladesh have found the T20 format the hardest to deal with. Asked how difficult it becomes to prepare with a World Cup every year, the Sri Lankan said: “I don’t think it is difficult. We have toured the West Indies more than the other teams. So preparing for that in the mind, try to get the right combinations. There’s opportunities for a lot of players.”

## Pitch in focus in Ahmedabad finale

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

Pitch talk has been a constant feature of India’s four-Test series against Australia and the trend continued on the eve of the final match in Ahmedabad which is likely to draw a record crowd on Thursday.

After rank turners were rolled out for the first three matches of the series, curiosity abounded about the possible nature of the surface in Ahmedabad.

With the groundstaff yet to confirm which of the two prepared pitches would be used, Australia’s stand-in captain Steve Smith decided to delay naming their playing XI.

“We’ll have a look (at the pitch on Wednesday) and we’ll reassess, but it could be we name the team at the toss,” Smith told reporters on Wednesday.

Smith will lead Australia again in the absence of regular skipper Pat Cummins who flew home after the second match in Delhi to be with his ailing mother in Sydney.

India retained the Border-Gavaskar trophy with back-to-back wins in Nagpur and Delhi but Smith says drawing the series would be no mean feat for his side.

“It’d be a huge achievement for the group, or any touring team that comes here to India and wins two Test matches,” Smith said.

India, who are 2-1 ahead in the series, would need to win the match to seal their place in the final of the World Test Championship in June.

## Betis in good hands against Man United

AFP, Barcelona

Real Betis were dealt a tough Europa League last 16 draw against Erik ten Hag’s Manchester United but the Spanish side are in good hands when it comes to facing the Red Devils.

Former Manchester City coach Manuel Pellegrini has curated an impressive record against the Premier League giants and will believe he can mastermind another victory over Barcelona’s conquerors in the play-off round.

Pellegrini and Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti exchanged words after their sides shared a 0-0 draw on Sunday in La Liga, joking about Liverpool’s emphatic 7-0 victory over Manchester United at Anfield earlier on.

The Chilean will be the happier of the two, ahead of Thursday’s first leg visit to Old Trafford, while Ancelotti’s Madrid must now host a Liverpool side with a newfound spring in their step in the Champions League next week.

Pellegrini, at Manchester City between 2013-2016, and later at West Ham, has only suffered defeat three times in 13 clashes with United, and will look to capitalise on their shock defeat and dented confidence.

Despite United’s humiliation at Anfield, Ten Hag’s side are still favourites against Betis, littered with stars including Marcus Rashford, Bruno Fernandes and Casemiro.

Pellegrini believes the Madrid draw shows Betis can compete with any team, even if most of his squad by contrast is unknown outside of Spain.

“The team is always working to improve, there are always players missing for different reasons and those who are fit have to push on,” said the coach. “For a long time this team has been (competitive), no matter who they are playing against. Today Madrid did a lot, it was a fair draw -- but the best chances were ours.”

## ‘There is no scope to be complacent’

**Jaker Ali Anik clinched the player of the tournament award as he topped the run-getters’ charts with 492 runs in the six innings he played averaging 98.40. The wicket-keeper batter scored a fifty and three centuries this season and also had the most dismissals in the tournament. The Daily Star’s Ekush Tapader caught up with the 25-year-old who discussed his goals and ambitions having scored runs regularly for the past two years.**

**The Daily Star (DS):** How does it feel to have become the player of the tournament?

**Jaker Ali (JA):** This is my first player of the tournament award in professional cricket. It’s a different feeling. You can say that I reaped the rewards of my hard work.

**DS:** How challenging was it?

**JA:** I scored three centuries on three different wickets. One was on a slow bouncy wicket, and one was on a turning wicket, a tricky wicket. The other one in Bogura was a completely grassy wicket where the pacers got a lot of movement. I scored a century there too. You can understand how challenging it was to have scored three centuries on three types of wickets. I had to maintain my focus. Every domestic match is important for youngsters like us, there is no scope to be complacent.

**DS:** You have been scoring runs for some time now. What did you do to improve your batting?

**JA:** I am much more serious about my batting now. I have been training a lot. But most importantly, I have been playing

a lot of matches. In the last 15-16 months, I have played around 26 four-day matches. There was the A Team tour followed by matches against the India A team and West Indies ‘A’ team. The domestic matches feel a little easier now after playing those high-intensity matches. I’ll have to give credit to



the coaches. Jamie Siddons was in the ‘A’ team, and Babul Sir was there (Mizanur Rahman).

**DS:** After two rounds of BCL, there was BPL, and then BCL again. You’ve got runs after that break. How difficult was this switch?

**JA:** It was a bit difficult. Whenever you go from Test cricket (first class) to T20, it is difficult to adapt. When I went to prepare for the T20s after finishing the first two BCL matches, it took me a day or two to settle down. Similarly, when I came back to Tests after finishing the T20s, it took me some time to adapt to the practice sessions.

**DS:** What are your strengths?

**JA:** You have to keep your temperament, patience, and mental toughness all the time. This is because, in the longer version game, the nature of the pitch changes every hour. The ball changes and the bowlers replenish their energy levels after breaks. A lot of attention has to be paid. I was very focused in this tournament. That’s probably it.

**DS:** The latest season of the national league was played with the Dukes ball. Has it had any effect?

**JA:** The BCL was played with the Kookaburra ball. But I must say that playing against Kookaburra has become much easier after

playing against the Dukes ball in the national league. I had to suffer against the Dukes ball as it aided swing and bounce. But when you get used to it, playing against the Kookaburra seems a little easier as there isn’t much swing with it. There has been an improvement due to the introduction of the Dukes ball.

**DS:** After such a performance, how hopeful are you to get called-up to the national side?

**JA:** There is always hope if you play well. This means I have to keep playing well. I will get called up when my time comes. My only thought right now is to keep performing.

**DS:** Which format do you want to prepare yourself for?

**JA:** Earlier, I used to bat at number seven. Recently, I have been given chances up the order, which is also a reason for my big scores. I don’t think the batting position will be a problem for me. If you stay focused, pick your bowlers, and stay at the crease, then you can score runs anywhere.



Chelsea’s Denis Zakaria and Kai Havertz celebrate their 2-0 victory on the night, 2-1 on aggregate, against Borussia Dortmund in their Champions League Last 16 fixture at Stamford Bridge in London on Tuesday. Havertz scored the second goal after Raheem Sterling’s opener as the English outfit saw off the Bundesliga outfit, who had come to London with a 11-game winning streak.

PHOTO: REUTERS