

‘I have nothing to lose’

Rony Talukdar’s comeback story can surely serve as encouragement to those who feel that the doors to the national side are permanently closed to players past the age of 30 that have yet to truly make a mark on the international stage. The 32-year old made a comeback to the T20I side after eight years and made the opportunity count by providing some flying starts in the historic whitewash series win over world champions England. The cricketer from Narayanganj spoke to The Daily Star’s Mazhar Uddin about his experiences and ups and downs during an exclusive interview. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star (DS): How did you manage to maintain focus during those eight years after being dropped following your T20I debut?

RT: It’s obviously a long time but I would say that every player goes through ups and downs in their career. In my case, that happened at the very beginning. But I got mental support from my family and that inspired me to work hard. I should also admit that I had few lackings as a batter and I had to accept that.

DS: What areas of your batting did you work on and did you plan to make a comeback to the national team through T20Is?

RT: Since I live in Narayanganj, I practice at our Knit Concern Cricket Academy. I worked specifically for the formats that I was going to play such as the National Cricket League, Bangladesh Cricket League, Bangladesh Premier League or even Dhaka Premier League. I had proper training facilities at the academy and that also helped me a lot to work on my game.

DS: You provided some flying starts for Bangladesh against England as an opener. Can you elaborate on the message the team management gave you?



RT: Our captain Shakib bhai and coach definitely supported me a lot. They told me to play the way I did in the BPL. I was told to express myself like I had done in domestic cricket. The selectors also backed me and told me not think about anything else.

DS: Did you feel any difference between when you made your debut back in 2015 and now?

RT: There was not much difference since the environment in the national team is always healthy and friendly. Everyone is eager to do something for the country and it was same when I played eight years ago. From the game’s point of view, yes things have changed. Everyone now has an aggressive mindset. There was no pressure on the players.

DS: You faced the likes of Jofra Archer, Mark Wood and Chris Woakes on your international comeback. Do you feel facing the world champions helped you in a way?

RT: To be honest, yes. As you mentioned, they all are world-class bowlers and whatever I did would boost my confidence in the coming days. After I got dismissed by Archer, Chandika Hithurusingha asked me how it felt to face a bowler like him. I replied that it was fine and that I tried to play my own game and focus on the ball, not the bowler.

DS: What is your message to other players like you, who may feel like their time is past?

RT: The only thing I can say is keep your fitness levels high. When a player is fit, age doesn’t matter. Shoaib Malik, who played with us in the BPL, is 42 years old and he is still playing T20s across the world. If he can play at this age, why can’t we? Since the selectors are emphasising performances and picked me, anyone else can do the same. I have nothing to lose and I will continue to flourish without thinking of anything else.



Fresh off a promising start in international cricket through the England series, Bangladesh batter Towhid Hridoy was back to domestic circuit yesterday, smashing an unbeaten 54 off 30 deliveries to get Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club to an eight-wicket victory over Dhaka Leopards in the opening match of the Dhaka Premier League at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Let the noise subside

SPORTS REPORTER

Ahead of the two white-ball series against England, all the noise in the media related to the captains of the two respective formats, ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal and T20I counterpart Shakib Al Hasan, not being on talking terms.

The information presented to the media was that there was an unhealthy environment in the dressing room. But although the ODI series was lost 2-1, the team blocked out the noise and staged a comeback in the T20Is with a 3-0 whitewash.

The difference in all four wins was a change in body language, especially against an England side that have been enjoying a purple patch, not just from a results perspective but also in terms of their brand of cricket. Their aggressive mentality has seamlessly translated across formats and left an impact that has proven difficult to contain in any condition.

Although the Tigers were expected to perform better in the ODIs, it was in the T20Is that they showed a new energy. That change was facilitated by some new cricketers in the line-up, those who did not appear to carry the fear or baggage of failure and emboldened by how Shakib communicated with them.

Mehedi Hasan Miraz yesterday said that all the cricketers were playing their best cricket.

“We didn’t care about the results. We tried to figure out how to implement the process and stay with the process,” he said. Overall, the team combination was good and we won because everyone played their best cricket,” he added.

The batting, bowling and fielding all left an impression in the T20Is, a change from the ODIs where the batting and especially fielding accentuated the need for major improvement.

It was all the more unexpected since the T20I team was full of faces who are yet to settle into the international arena.

The likes of Towhid Hridoy and Rony Talukdar showed their mettle, having performed in the domestic circuit for a number of years, while Najmul Hossain Shanto and Hasan Mahmud continued to gain a foothold. After the game, it could be surmised that Shakib had kept things simple in the dressing room. There were no expectations from the three departments, only plans.

“We didn’t dream of it, but we also didn’t put ourselves under pressure before the series. We didn’t talk about winning games. We just wanted to play good cricket,” he had remarked.

Thus, Hridoy and Rony played their shots, Hasan got a yorker in during an important stage of the second T20I to go with stellar death-bowling in the first game and

Shanto struck runs in all three T20Is. The important thing for Shakib was performances in the recent BPL, where good wickets challenged bowlers and batters carried confidence into national set-up.

“Everyone in this [T20I] team performed in this year’s BPL. It wasn’t too long before the England tour. The top five-six batters in this series were also the top run-getters in the BPL. It is the same for the highest wicket-takers. The

confidence did carry over,” Shakib had said on Tuesday. The importance was placed in players expressing themselves and the management counted on them. However, Chandika Hathurusingha had started his first spell with success in 2014. If Bangladesh is to continue in this vein, the noise from the BCB hierarchy regarding players needs to subside so they do not carry fear of failure into series.

Ahead of every series, there is talk of lack of leg-spin options, batting-order deficiencies and not being able to put up 180-plus scores in T20Is. If providing good pitches in the BPL can lead to a 3-0 sweep of England in a format where the Tigers have often been found wanting, it indeed is time to focus on domestic cricket and fixing such issues instead of talking about individuals.

Let the noise subside, so performance in international cricket does not become the issue.



Key facts about the 2026 FIFA World Cup format

AGENCIES

The expanded 2026 men’s World Cup in North America will start with 12 groups of four teams in a change from the original planned format of 16 groups of three, football’s world governing body FIFA announced on Tuesday. “The revised format mitigates the risk of collusion and ensures that all the teams play a minimum of three matches, while providing balanced rest time between competing teams,” FIFA said. “The groups of four have been absolutely incredible until the last minute of the last match,” FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in December.

The expanded 2026 men’s World Cup in North America will start with 12 groups of four teams in a change from the original planned format of 16 groups of three, football’s world governing body FIFA announced on Tuesday.

The next World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico will be the first to feature 48 teams, a sharp increase from the 32 sides at last year’s tournament in Qatar.

There will be 104 matches, a huge rise compared to the 64 games played in the 2022 tournament and an increase even on the original plan that the 2026 World Cup would feature 80 matches.

FIFA’s initial plan for 2026 was for 16 groups of three teams, from which the top two countries would advance to the last 32.

The top two teams in each group will go through to the knockout round along with the eight best third-placed sides.

The finalists, and the teams finishing third and fourth, will play a total of eight games instead of the current seven.

The number of venues for the 2026 finals will double, from eight stadiums in Qatar last year to 16.

Eleven venues will be in the USA, with three in Mexico and two in Canada.

The World Cup may be played over a longer period, after Qatar 2022 was held over just 29 days. The final will be held on July 19.

Haaland gives Leipzig a ‘brutally bitter evening’

AGENCIES

Erling Haaland virtually wrote his own record book for Manchester City against RB Leipzig on a thrilling night at the Etihad Stadium, but manager Pep Guardiola spoiled what might have been one more.

Haaland scored five goals as City steamrolled their German opponents into submission in a 7-0 rout to put them into the Champions League quarter-finals for the sixth consecutive season before Guardiola substituted him in the 63rd minute.

No player in Champions League history has scored six goals in a game.

“If he achieved this milestone, the record, at 22, will be boring, his life, so now he’ll have a target to do it in the future, here and everywhere,” Guardiola said. “So that’s why I make a substitution.”

Haaland became the third player in history to score five goals in a game, matching Luiz Adriano, who achieved the feat in 2014 for Shakhtar Donetsk, and Lionel Messi, in 2012 for Barcelona -- with Guardiola as coach.

“I told (Guardiola) I would love to score a double hat-trick but what can I



do?,” Haaland, who has now scored 10 goals in six Champions League games this season, said on being substituted in the 63rd minute, six minutes after netting his fifth goal of the night.

“I’m blurry in my head. I remember shooting but not thinking,” Haaland told BT Sport. “I was so tired after my celebrations.”

“My super strength is scoring goals.

Should I be honest? A lot of goals today, I didn’t think (through). I was just trying to get it into the back of the net. A lot of it is being quick in the mind and trying to put it where the goalkeeper is not.”

Haaland has now scored 10 goals in six Champions League games this season.

RB Leipzig defender Benjamin Hen-

richs said his side were “eaten up” by an Erling Haaland-led City.

Haaland scored five goals, including a first half hat-trick, as City blew the German visitors out of the water to qualify 8-1 on aggregate.

Henrichs was at a loss to explain how his side, who came into the match on level pegging from the first leg, could lose so convincingly.

“I think we were eaten up out there,” he said. “I’ve never lost 7-0 in my career. It’s a totally brutally bitter evening for us.”

Henrichs said Haaland, who moved from Bundesliga side Borussia Dortmund to Manchester City last season, dominated Leipzig with his physicality.

“He’s a brutally physical player. He’s difficult to defend and brings so much to the game.

“The way he played today says a lot about his quality.”

Leipzig manager Marco Rose, who coached Haaland at Dortmund and Red Bull Salzburg, said he knew the threat posed by the Norwegian.

“I know Erling well and I know his quality -- and how he can perform. When Erling sees the goal, he wants to score.”