

Tamim ruled out of Afghan Test

SPORTS REPORTER

After intense speculation over the past few days, experienced batter Tamim Iqbal was eventually ruled out of the one-off Test against Afghanistan starting from today, the Bangladesh Cricket Board confirmed in a press release yesterday.

Bangladesh's ODI had been struggling after an old back injury resurfaced during a training session on Sunday, leading to concerns about whether he would recover in time.

"Tamim has been experiencing lower back pain, which has troubled him from time to time. Our treatment and procedures focused on reducing the pain and improving his functional ability. Unfortunately, his condition hasn't improved sufficiently enough for him to play the Test match. He felt stiffness and pain while batting and fielding in training and has been unable to complete the physical preparations required to play for five days," team physio Muzadded Alpha Sany was quoted as saying in the press release.

According to sources, Tamim was keen to play but the team management were unwilling to take risks. Tamim had missed the series against India last year due to a groin injury before returning for the one-day series against England and also playing both the home and away ODI series against Ireland.

It was learned that Tamim first suffered the back injury during the India series last year. During the trip to England this year for the Ireland series, Tamim underwent an MRI which revealed that he had a tear.



Tamim Iqbal, who has been ruled out of the Afghanistan Test due to a recurring back issue, looks on as Mahmudul Hasan Joy trains with the team in Mirpur yesterday. In Tamim's absence, Joy and Zakir Hasan are expected to open the innings for the Tigers in the lone Test against the Afghans, starting at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bangladesh suffered a 224-run hammering in their only Test ever played against Afghanistan in Chattogram in 2019.
- In Shakib Al Hasan's absence, Liton Das will become Bangladesh's 12th Test captain today.
- This is set to be Bangladesh's second Test this year. The Tigers won by seven wickets against Ireland in Mirpur in April this year.
- This is going to be Afghanistan's first Test in over two years. Afghanistan won by six wickets in their previous Test, against Zimbabwe in 2021.
- Star Afghan leggie Rashid Khan, who had turned the destroyer in chief in the previous Test played against Bangladesh, has been rested for this Test.

'We are just as ambitious as Bangladesh'

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Since receiving Test status in 2017, Afghanistan have only played just six Tests, winning three, including a 224-run win against Bangladesh in Chattogram in 2019. Interestingly, the one-off Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur from today will be Hashmatullah Shahidi and Co.'s first Test in over two years.

Faced with the challenges that come from not playing a Test match since facing Zimbabwe in 2021, head coach Jonathan Trott looked at Bangladesh as an example of how to approach the early days in the longest format.

"I think we are just as ambitious as Bangladesh when they started playing Tests. You see Bangladesh now going on to beat other teams at home. I think it's important to have that ambition. I think it is what drives the game. All Test cricketers will tell you that they like playing Test cricket. They will say it is their favourite format because of the challenges and tests. Individually as well. It is an exciting thing, something that I am looking forward to seeing tomorrow [today]," Trott said yesterday.

In the absence of star cricketer Rashid Khan, at least six Afghan cricketers are waiting to make their Test debut. The 52-year-old Englishman admitted that the Tigers would have the advantage on their home turf.

"I think any team playing at home will have a bit of an advantage. Certainly a team that has played more Tests by a long stretch will also have a bit of an advantage. It doesn't mean they will play better than us tomorrow. We prepared really well. I feel the players have trained exceptionally well. They are excited to play a Test in Bangladesh. Whatever has happened in the past, whoever is the favourite and whatever the conditions, it is all about what happens tomorrow [Wednesday] and who does it the best. It is my job to make sure everyone is ready," he said.



Sporting conditions a test of Tigers' strengths

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The selection of five pacers in the Bangladesh squad was a major talking point ahead of the one-off Test against Afghanistan, slated to begin today at Dhaka. Inevitably, even a day ahead of the match, discussions surrounded the greenish pitch. However, conditions can change pretty fast in Mirpur, but above all else the Tigers were looking for good Test match conditions in order to grow.

Of the last 10 Tests that the Tigers have played, they won only one while losing eight. Thus their search for consistency in the format is an ongoing process. In the context of competitiveness, there are no World Test Championship points to be had from the match as it is not part of the WTC cycle.

Afghanistan left their best spinner Rashid Khan at home, which adds to the feeling that no one quite wants to risk stars during a World Cup year. The target then for Bangladesh will be to test their own strengths against an Afghan side that played their last Test in 2021 and are lacking in Test experience.

Tigers' head coach Chandika Hathurusingha has a good idea about conditions and bluntly said that the wicket would behave like a sporting track. The specific plan is to test the team's strengths in various conditions at home. After

preparing green wickets against Ireland in Sylhet, the plan for Afghanistan was an extension of curating conditions conducive for the pace unit.

"Grass is green because of the rain the last few days. I have seen green wickets here before. We played against Ireland on a green wicket," he said when asked about the greenish looking pitch.

"We have fast bowlers but we need to give them conditions that



suits their strengths. We have good spinners as well. So, this game is only starting as a green wicket. With this heat, it will deteriorate very quickly and then it may help the spinners in the latter parts of the game. So, I think this pitch is a good, sporting wicket for everybody: batter, fast bowlers and spinners. So, I'd like to see a good contest," Hathurusingha said at the press conference yesterday.

On the broader context of Test match philosophy, Hathurusingha was willing to let go of the rigidity

of playing only in spin-friendly conditions at home while the search goes on for a particular brand of cricket.

"Before that Ireland series, we wanted to play a certain brand of cricket, regardless of the result. So yes, our endgame is to get results, but we want to understand how our skillset would last over five days and varying conditions, challenging us to play in a certain way.

"When we wanted to play and get some points, when we play the Test championship, we might tactically do different things, but this game is giving us an opportunity to play on a sporting wicket," he added.

A member of the team management opined that such wickets would become more common at home if the pacers continued to rise. The top four pacers in Bangladesh Test setup -- Khaled Ahmed, Ebadot Hossain, Taskin Ahmed and Shoriful Islam -- have produced just 19 wickets at home in the last two years. The very same speedsters accounted for a whopping 52 wickets away from home in the same period.

"Whether it's a Test championship or not, we'll find the way best-suited to us when we are playing at home. At the same time, we keep an eye on our development to play away from home," the head coach said, driving his point home as Tigers look to test themselves and grow.

Nadal out of top 100 after 20 years

AGENCIES

While Novak Djokovic reclaimed the World No. 1 ranking from Carlos Alcaraz after winning a record 23rd Grand Slam title at the French Open, there were clear signs of the end of an era as Rafael Nadal dropped out of the top 100 and reached his worst position in the rankings since March of 2003, when he was just a 16-year-old.

Nadal, a 14-time French Open champion, has endured an injury-plagued season and not played since January because of a hip injury sustained during the Australian Open.

The 37-year-old has dropped from 15th to 136th in the rankings due to his continued absence from the tour. He underwent surgery earlier this month and is expected to be out for five months.

Meanwhile, Djokovic began his record-extending 388th week at the summit on Monday, jumping two places in the standings after his victory in Paris at the weekend. Alcaraz dropped to second place while Daniil Medvedev, who crashed out in the first round, also slid one place down to third. Roland Garros runner-up Casper Ruud remained in fourth place.

In the women's rankings, Iga Swiatek retained top spot after defending her French Open title. She has held the ranking since April 2022, moving to the summit following Ash Barty's retirement.

Women footballers return from break with not much to look for

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With no domestic or international engagement on the cards, the national women's team footballers started returning to the residential camp yesterday after enjoying a five-day break as the Women's Super League (WSL) failed to kick off.

The announced start of the proposed league has been deferred twice -- May 15 and June 10, leaving the players frustrated and they asked for a break from continuous training.

"Nineteen out of 34 players have joined the camp so far and the rest are on their way to Dhaka. Only Tahura Khatun will join the camp a couple of days later as she is suffering from fever," assistant coach Mahbubur Rahman Litu informed, adding that the players will resume training this morning.

"Maria [Mandal], Monika [Chakma] and Sabina [Khatun] requested us for four or five days' break. I conveyed the message to Paul [Smalley] sir and [Mahfuza Akter] Kiran apa, who granted a five-day break," added Litu.

Krishna Rani Sarker and Sanjida Akter were the first to return to Dhaka after enjoying their break in Rangamati along with Anuching Mogini and others. "I am now at the camp. I had a fine



time during the break and I'm waiting for another break ahead for Eid. Of course, I am mentally happy after the break," Krishna told The Daily Star. "Actually, I know nothing about our next engagements and don't want to say anything about the WSL."

As acting general secretary Emran Hasan Tushar did not respond to calls, assistant coach Litu informed that BFF is yet to finalise FIFA friendly matches but is still trying to use the upcoming

FIFA window.

Though there was no explanation regarding the deferment of the league by the BFF, Fahad Karim, CEO of the tournament's rights holder K Sports, gave his reasons for the deferral.

"The challenge is that I am not getting live broadcasting slot because of schedules of upcoming SAFF Championship while the cricket series between Afghanistan and Bangladesh conflicts with the WSL schedules. Out of the 13 match days, we would not be able to broadcast six match days live despite the league having commercial value," Fahad told The Daily Star.

"Another challenge was that one of the four franchise owners backed out, so I didn't want to start the league haphazardly. The other owners also requested me to not hold the league during the month of financial closing," Fahad said, adding that he would sit with the BFF officials within a couple of days to clear everything.

Asked whether there is any chance of the league getting underway soon, Fahad said, "Now I have confirmed all four franchises for the participation and WSL will be held. We may not do much for the players in the inaugural season but I think they will be happy with the first season."



PSG-Mbappe saga continues

AFP, Paris

Kylian Mbappe has never discussed extending his contract with Paris Saint-Germain beyond next year, the France superstar told AFP in a statement on Tuesday, the day after he sent a letter to the club confirming he would not take up an option to remain at the French champions until 2025.

The club "were informed on July 15, 2022" of his decision not to activate an option to extend his contract, which ends after next season, for an extra year "and the only aim of the letter was to confirm what had already been spoken about previously," said the statement.

"Kylian Mbappe and his entourage confirm that this matter has not been discussed since over the course of the year, except a fortnight ago to announce the sending of the letter.

"No potential contract extension has been mentioned," it continued.

"After maintaining publicly in recent weeks that he would be a PSG player next season, Kylian Mbappe has not asked to leave this summer and has just confirmed to the club that he would not be activating the extra year," Mbappe and his entourage explained.

The statement concluded by saying that the 2018 World Cup winner "and his entourage regret that the letter was circulated in the media and that these exchanges were made public with the sole aim of damaging their image and the discussions with the club".

Mbappe's letter to PSG comes a year after the 24-year-old France striker signed a new deal to stay at the French champions, turning down an approach from Real Madrid in the process.

According to sources with knowledge of the discussions, PSG were surprised that the letter was leaked and do not envisage letting Mbappe leave for nothing.

That means either renegotiating the contract or selling him in this transfer window.



The Dhaka Premier Division Women's Cricket League went down to the wire, with league leaders Mohammedan facing off against second-placed Rupali Bank, who were just a point behind, in the final round of fixtures yesterday. Led by a 90-ball 69-run knock from Mukta Ravindra Magre, Rupali Bank overturned their deficit and defeated last season's champions by 53 runs to claim the title.

PHOTO: BCB