

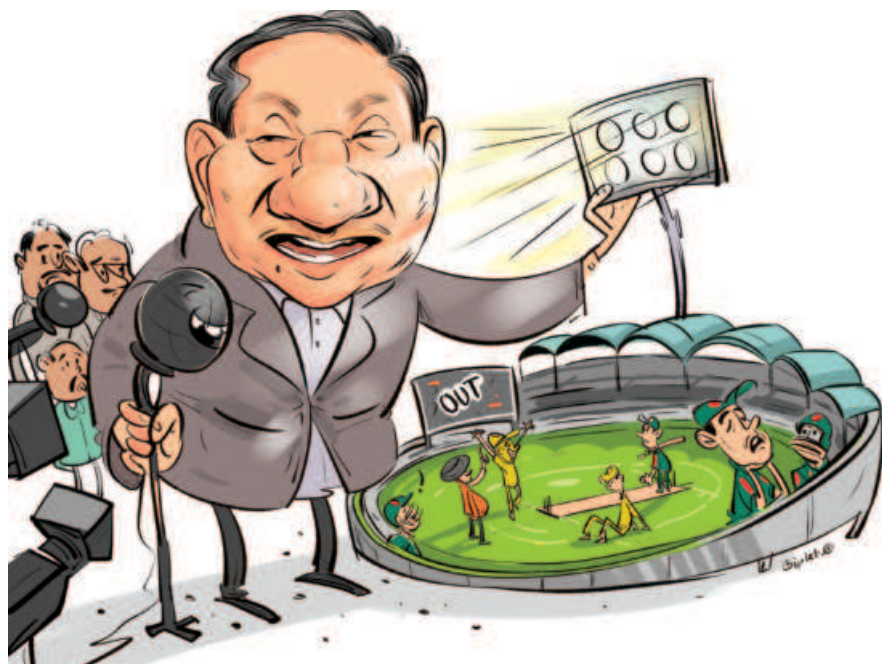
More than just CRICKETING REASONS?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI from Chattogram

Bangladesh slumped to a 142-run defeat against Afghanistan in the second and penultimate ODI on Saturday to lose their first-ever ODI series against the visitors. The Tigers have enjoyed a healthy record at home and the series defeat was only their third at home since 2016. The question that most comes to mind is whether the defeat had more to do with non-cricketing reasons than cricketing ones.

"Please stick to cricket. Don't step outside of cricket. When players coming up in the future do well, write about it. When they play badly, write about that too and criticise them; that is all good. We all know that sometimes we overstep our boundaries," was a message from ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal towards the media during his retirement announcement on Thursday, July 6 – a decision he would withdraw on July 7. As a cricket reporter however, watching Bangladesh perform on July 8, it was difficult to just "stick to cricket".

Of course, there were cricketing reasons. The bowlers were not able to create pressure and keep a batter at one end for long. Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran had a field day rotating the strike; punishing loose balls which were aplenty. The Afghan spinners were a handful and it was once again portrayed that trying to read them, after the delivery had already landed, was a difficult task and the Tigers had a torrid time.



But beyond that, the larger picture and the reasons for that performance were beyond just cricket. The body language of the players, lacking in concrete ideas or execution of plans, were all on view. As if they had turned subpar in a matter of days.

Before every series there used to be some noise that used to distract players but for a few months or so, from the T20 World Cup to head coach Chandika

Hathursingha's arrival and beyond, things had stayed relatively quiet. Barring the usual Shakib Al Hasan controversy, which usually stays as an individual's issue separate from the whole team, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had not given fuel to fire and the Tigers enjoyed a serene time.

In an interview, the BCB president then brought along fresh controversy to the public eye regarding Shakib and

Tamim's rift and division within the team. The can of worms did not open further due to subsequent quiet from the board president. He had also said back in February that it would be hard for the head coach to find him this time around in the Sri Lankan's second stint.

Despite that, when Tamim inadvertently talked about his fitness ahead of the first ODI in Chattogram on July 4, the BCB president brought up more information in another interview. He reiterated that Hathursingha was not happy with Tamim's revelation. The ensuing chaos then came to a head when Tamim took the decision to retire from international cricket, followed by his withdrawal the next day.

These problems surface from the team management's, and in extension, the board's inability to solve the team's issues internally. While the media's task is to report on inconsistencies, as the governing body of Bangladesh cricket, BCB's officials need more nuance to handle the team's own environment. It should not be about giving the media half-truth or no information but about its own handling of the situation.

Now a complete quiet has come up. The board officials have been asked to not comment to the media as if the very air should stand still. Thus, opinions regarding what happened to the team are also being kept close to the pocket. As far as analysis should go, there is more than just cricket arching over the current passage of play.

Ispahani-Prothom Alo inter-uni football from July 14

SPORTS REPORTER

The Ispahani-Prothom Alo Inter University Football Tournament will kick off on July 14 in Chattogram, informed organisers at a press briefing at a hotel in the capital yesterday.

The tournament will feature 33 universities – both public and private – at preliminary level, which will be held in Chattogram, Cumilla and Dhaka. The final round will be held at the Daffodil International University campus in Dhaka with eight teams while the final match will be held on July 29.

All the matches will be of 70-minute duration with a 10-minute recess. The teams will have a 20-member squad each.

The champion team will receive Tk five lacs while the runners-up team will get Tk three lacs, informed organisers at the press briefing.

The press briefing was conducted by Prothom Alo's head of sports, Utpal Shuvro, while the newspaper's editor Matiur Rahman, former national team coach Golam Sarwar Tipu, former national footballer Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chunnu, Daffodil University's vice chancellor Dr Lutfor Rahman, Ispahani Group director Zahida Ispahani and the company's general manager Omar Hannan also spoke on the occasion.

Bangladesh Football Federation's referees' committee chief Azad Rahman conducted the draw ceremony for the tournament.

Golam Sarwar Tipu will lead a 19-member tournament committee while Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chunnu will lead the technical committee.

Ebadot out of Afghanistan series

SPORTS REPORTER

Ebadot Hossain has been ruled out of the third and final ODI as well as the T20 series against Afghanistan after suffering a knee injury during the second match on Saturday, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) confirmed on Saturday.

The pacer fell over after feeling his knee during his run-up while bowling his final over and later limped off the ground along with the physio.

The team physio Muzadded Alpha Sany revealed that the injury was not a major one and he expects the pacer to recover in two weeks' time, meaning Ebadot would miss both the T20Is.

"The MRI suggests that this is not a major injury. We expect him to recover in about two weeks' time. He will remain with the team as he does his rehab," he said.

The first T20I of the two-match series is scheduled for July 14, while the second game will take place on July 16. Both matches will take place in Sylhet.

'Play till 32 and then do whatever you want to'

SPORTS REPORTER

Praising the performance of both the young and the experienced footballers in the just-concluded SAFF Championship, Bangladesh Football Federation's president Kazi Salahuddin urged everyone to stay disciplined in the next three to four months in a bid to overcome the first round hurdle of World Cup Qualifiers in October.

Bangladesh put on an improved show in the regional football championship to reach the semifinals for the first time in 14 years, but another uphill task awaits them in the form of World Cup Qualifiers. The men in red and green will face a higher-ranked opponent from among nine teams: Indonesia, Chinese Taipei, Maldives, Yemen, Afghanistan, Singapore, Myanmar, Nepal, Cambodia – in home-and-away basis matches, scheduled for October 12 and 17.

Recalling the experience of the 2016 defeat against lowly Bhutan during the same stage of World Cup Qualifiers, in the same month of October, Salahuddin reminded the players of the consequence if Bangladesh fail to overcome the first round hurdle.

"I have a small message to all of you for which is why I have called you here," Salahuddin told players at a programme to hand over a promised Tk 50 lac bonus at the BFF house yesterday.

"In October, we have matches of World Cup and Asian Cup [Qualifiers]. If we lose the matches, we will be out for the next three

years. We need to win the matches so that our calendar in next three years remains packed. This is very important [for us]," said the BFF boss.

"For the next three to four months, I want absolute determination from you. Your football career is small, so you have to be absolutely disciplined; no late night, no alcohol and training is a must," Salahuddin



said. "You can get all those things when you are 32 or 33 and when there will be nothing to do or nothing to play for. You can do everything."

Citing examples of Cristiano Ronaldo and basketball legend Michael Jordan, Salahuddin said, "No player is born with talent. Every player may have talent, but he has to work

hard. [Sheikh] Morsalin, [Faisal Ahmed] Fahim, Isa [Faisal] – you have a lot of time and now it is time for training and training. Play till 32 and then do anything you want to do."

The BFF boss praised other players as well including some seniors.

"[Anisur Rahman] Zico has become the best goalkeeper of the tournament and we take a lot of pride in that. There were some new players of whom left-back Isa played magnificently; the two central defenders – Tapu (Barman) and Tariq (Kazi) too. Tariq had wonderful tournament even though he made a mistake, which may happen in football but he covered up for it later.

"Senior Sohel Rana and Sohel Rana of Abahani did wonderfully well. And the younger players like Fahim, Morsalin and Ridoy are the future of Bangladesh football. I am pleased with their performance. We have a superstar in Rakib. He is now the best forward of Bangladesh," praised the legendary footballer.

"If you [Rakib] train properly and maintain discipline and take care of yourself, you can be the best player of South Asia of all time. You have the talent and speed; what you need to improve upon is the position sense, and you can talk to the coach about it," said the former Bangladesh international.

"This is time for you to do your job and I hope you will be very serious about it. If you do your job properly and play well, money will fly in," the BFF boss concluded.



JOTY puts batters in the dock

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh captain Nigar Sultana Joty expressed her disappointment over her team's poor batting performance following a seven-wicket defeat against India in the opening T20I of the three-match series at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Bangladesh failed to put up a fighting total against their formidable opponents as lack of batting firepower resulted in the Tigresses managing only 114 runs for five wickets in full quota of 20 overs. Joty was not ready to make inexperience as an excuse behind the batting failures despite the hosts having fielded a lot of new players.

"What I think was a case of lack of intent. When you play wearing a national jersey, you are experienced," said Joty.

The Bangladesh skipper also urged her players to work individually. "When a player gets a start, she should carry her innings; why would she get out after 25 runs? We have to think about our shot-selection and play according to the situation's demand," she added.

In the match, Smriti Mandhana (38) and captain Harmanpreet Kaur (54 not out) stitched a 70-run partnership for the third wicket after an early hiccup as the visitors cruised past Bangladesh's meagre total with 22 deliveries to spare.

The second T20I will take place at the same venue on July 11.

'Three games of unbelievable cricket'



Mark Wood and Chris Woakes have their arms raised in joy as England celebrate a much-needed victory in the third Ashes Test against Australia by three wickets at Headingley yesterday to stay alive in the five-match series, trailing 2-1 with the next match scheduled to start on July 19 at Old Trafford. [Inset] Although Harry Brook could not stay till the end, it was his 75 that had kept the hosts alive earlier on the fourth day.

PHOTO: REUTERS

AGENCIES

England beat Australia by three wickets in a nail-biting third Test at Headingley on Sunday to keep the five-match Ashes series alive.

Harry Brook and Chris Woakes shared a crucial partnership of 59 that took England to the brink of victory before Brook fell for 75 to Mitchell Starc (5-78). The recalled duo of Woakes (32 not out) and Mark Wood (16 not out) then saw England home with more than a day to spare to cut Australia's series lead to 2-1.

Wood, who was adjudged the player-of-the-match for his seven wickets and 40 runs in the match, revealed that it got nery for him before he got in the middle with the bat to see his side through in the second innings.

"Definitely, delighted to be here, especially as man of the match. Great win for us and it keeps the series alive. I was not good in that dressing room. The lads will tell you, sweaty palms all the way. But it's a lot easier out in the middle. To go up against some of the best fast bowlers in the world, it's the first time I've got England over the line with the bat so I'm delighted," he said after the match.

"Stokesy was very clear about my role, bowl short, sharp spells and give it everything I've got," he added.

England skipper Ben Stokes credited the

memories England have at Headingley and said that the 10-day break would help his side recover and come back with full steam.

"I think it will be great for both teams, it's 2-1 and the next game is vital, so we want to be fresh and ready. Three games of unbelievable cricket, so the break will do quite a few bodies the world of good. Sensational, we love coming here and playing cricket. This place has memories that people will always remember and we love playing here," Stokes said.

While Wood rejoiced at his chance to make an impact, Australia skipper Pat Cummins rued his side's inability to make use of positions of strength.

"There's a few moments that went back and forth. Day one we lost six for 20-odd, yesterday the sun was out and we missed an opportunity. Few key moments. Seems like a series where each sessions swings in one team's favour and then the other," he said.

The series continues with the fourth Test at Old Trafford starting on July 19, with Australia now having two games in which to seal their first Ashes campaign triumph in England in 22 years.

England are bidding to become just the second team to win a Test series from 2-0 down after the 1936/37 Australia side, inspired by batting great Don Bradman, that recovered from that deficit to win the Ashes 3-2.