



BRACE FOR THE ASIAN BATTLE

SHAKIB'S CAPTAINCY TO DEFINE how deafening is the Tigers' roar

From the start of 2021 till August 2022 – before Shakib took over – the highest strike-rate for an individual batter who had played at least 16 games for Bangladesh was 117.46, attained by Afif Hossain in his 33 innings. 340 fours and 113 sixes came from the bat of Bangladesh batters in 35 games during that period. The average strike-rate of batters during that period was 110.5.

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

It was a curious innings from Shakib Al Hasan in March last year against South Africa that led Bangladesh to a momentous win in the first ODI of the bilateral series at Centurion. During a 64-ball 77, Shakib tactically outmanoeuvred South Africa, starting his hitting way earlier than expected. In fact, he did it in the middle overs. The innings, apart from contributing to a win that day, and an ensuing series win later, was a precursor to a much-needed change of approach. Shakib, perhaps, was showing how to go against the grain of what the usual approach was and turn what looked like a 280-score at first into a 300-plus one.

What are the factors that can facilitate a change of style so that Bangladesh are able to add more runs to the scoreboard?

To be more attacking means players being able to express themselves. On one hand, the leadership has a key role in communicating how and when the batters can be aggressive. On the other hand, a congenial dressing room environment also has a part to play in players being able to express themselves.

Effecting that change in style is an important discourse in Bangladesh cricket because of the way the Bangladesh ODI side have been trying to transform themselves over the last one and a half years. But the Tigers now have a new captain in Shakib after Tamim Iqbal stepped down following his retirement saga after a fairly successful stint.

Merely a 24-year-old when he captained in the 2011 World Cup, Shakib now has become a much more mature player and a veteran in the side. His impact as a captain may have to be judged from recent years rather than the chaotic times of 2011.

Will Shakib go aggressively in driving the team towards that playing style which may have an important effect on the team's World Cup ambitions? Only time can tell but the T20I side's recent changes under Shakib might shed some light on whether a change in approach has been seen in the shortest format.

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In 21 matches since Shakib was made captain, the average strike-rate of batters went up to 126.

279 fours and 83 sixes have also come in these 21 games. Individual strike-rates soared, with Liton Das attaining a strike-rate of 141.6 in 19 matches during this period. Average boundaries hit per match went from 12.9 up to 17.2 following Shakib's captaincy.

These statistics speak of a significant increase in run-scoring tempo of the batters. Anyone familiar with Bangladesh's T20 fortunes knows that this recent change in tempo might have been a difficult one to effect.

England have now successfully been able to implement a 'Bazball' philosophy, especially by giving freedom to their batters.

"We want to create an environment where everyone has the freedom to try things without fear. I know it hasn't always been that way, even though we've always had the ability. We want our guys



to feel that clarity and confidence from us: We picked you because you're the best in the country at what you do. Hold nothing back. Express yourself. Show us what you can really do," England's Test captain Ben Stokes wrote in a Players' Tribune column in June this year.

Freedom has been a difficult concept to grasp in Bangladesh cricket. If freedom is what one wants to imbue, who better than Shakib to do it? During the aforementioned period of his captaincy, Shakib led by example

the betterment of the team," Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, cricket analyst and mentor to many national team stars, opined.

"A captain's playing philosophy has to make an impression on the team and it will come. The players we have right now, Shakib's thought-process goes very well with them. Look at Tanzid Tamim, [Najmul Hossain] Shanto, Tawhid Hridoy, or Shakib himself or how Mushfiqur [Rahim] is playing at the moment, Shamim Hossain or even Afif [Hossain]; they play a similar type of cricket. Even Ebadot [Hossain], Hasan [Mahmud] or Taskin [Ahmed] have it," Fahim explained.

With a strike-rate of over 131, the second-highest amongst Bangladesh batters who played at least 10 innings.

Since Chandika Hathurusingha's arrival, the ODI team has stepped on the pedal too, putting up big scores. The approach in the middle overs, with Shakib, Tawhid Hridoy, and Mushfiqur Rahim forming the core, has been one focused on acceleration.

An approach, especially one that is aggressive, will have to be shown with the bat, ball, and in the field. What are the things Shakib will have to convince the others to do?

"Shakib will make sure that the feeling of ownership courses through the side. He will give the individuals that space and create opportunities for everyone to get credited. He will have to make everyone feel their importance in the side. With these, everyone's sense of responsibility will increase and they will take actions on their own for

When everyone develops a sense of responsibility, they own the team and take responsibility to prepare themselves too. They become thinking cricketers, a kind of thinking used to do. The players start thinking and become more educated. They do something because they know what they are doing. When someone knows what they are doing, the effect is much bigger," Fahim said, regarding creating a sense of responsibility throughout the team.

The pace unit, with recent performances, has earned its freedom in particular. The way Mushfiqur has flourished in a new role is commendable too.

The skill is there in the side. The experience of playing ODIs would come in handy. But following the Afghanistan series, the template now must be set from the Asia Cup. A big hurdle but also an opportunity for Shakib to make that impression.

A chance for pacers to show what they are made of

NABID YEASIN

Rubel Hossain's yorker going through the bat and pads of James Anderson at the Adelaide Oval in the 2015 World Cup will forever remain one of the most iconic moments in Bangladesh cricket. That moment helped Bangladesh make it to the quarterfinal of the World Cup for the first time at the expense of mighty England.

The 2015 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand saw the Bangladesh pacers – skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Rubel, and Taskin Ahmed – scalp a total of 24 wickets, the major force behind propelling the Tigers to their best-ever showing in a mega event.

A young Taskin, part of that pace bowling trio, has now transformed into a much more potent and mature campaigner and spearheads the current unit of quicks who are hailed as arguably the best group of pacers Bangladesh has ever had.

Taskin is joined by the likes of Mustafizur Rahman, Hasan Mahmud, Shoriful Islam, and an uncapped 20-year-old Tanzim Hasan, who replaced an injured Ebadot Hossain in the squad. Losing Ebadot, who took wickets in 11 of the 12 ODIs he has played so far, to a knee injury sustained in the Afghanistan series at home in July is sure to hurt the Tigers and will only intensify the challenge they are to face in the Asia Cup in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The current crop of pacers has had successes in recent times. Shoriful's spirited bowling to get his career-best four for 21 against



Afghanistan to help the Tigers shrug off the sudden announcement of Tamim Iqbal stepping down from captaincy by getting a consolation win in the final ODI last month could spring to mind when thought of the rare instances that Bangladesh pacers dominated proceedings in the format.

Besides that, the historic Test win in New Zealand in 2022 and the maiden ODI series win over South Africa in their own backyard in March the same year were all orchestrated by feisty performances from the likes of Taskin and Ebadot.

However, the upcoming Asia Cup is set to pose a different challenge to pacers who are still untested in major tournaments. According to veteran pace-bowling coach Sarwar Imran, how Taskin and Co will do in the continental championship will go a long way to showing how good Bangladesh's chances are in the upcoming ODI World Cup, to be played in fairly similar conditions in India later this year.

"Obviously, our pace bowling has improved a lot from how it was in the

past. However, our pacers have still not been tested in big tournaments like this [the Asia Cup]. So, this is going to be a big challenge for this group of pacers," Imran told The Daily Star.

According to Imran, sporadic successes do not put the Tigers' pace bowling unit up there among the best, especially when compared to the likes of Pakistan's Haris Rauf, Naseem Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi or India's Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammad Shami and Mohammad Siraj.

"We bowled well to win a Test in New Zealand, and then we won an ODI series in South Africa. Surely, our pacers have improved a lot. But that does not necessarily mean that our pacers are the best. These few instances of success cannot be used to judge the pace bowling unit.

"Even though they have been doing well, these types of tournaments that are overseen by the ICC [International Cricket Council] or the ACC [Asian Cricket Council] are often played on batting-friendly wickets. So, doing well here

in these tournaments where batters usually get advantage... this will show how well rounded we are as a pace bowling unit," Imran added.

One aspect where the Bangladesh pacers might suffer in the upcoming tournaments is in bringing in variations needed to adjust to demanding situations. While Taskin can be relied on to fire in a barrage of quick 145 kmph-plus deliveries, those might not be enough to contain runs once the batters settle on surfaces that are expected to aid them.

Also, Mustafizur is no longer a mystery like he used to be to batters around the globe while Shoriful's inconsistency is something the young pacer is yet to overcome. With all these, factor in that Ebadot, known for his effective yorkers in the death and rising bouncers that startle the batters, is no longer in the scene, this Asia Cup will surely be a litmus test for the Tigers' pace-bowling unit.

"Our pacers do have variations in store. But then again, how our pacers react when batters get in the groove and start hitting boundaries is what will make the difference. Maybe this Asia Cup will show our pacers' ability to hold their nerves, how well they can bowl in pressure situations and in the slog overs, or how well they can bring in the variations and bowl those yorkers, and slower and basically adjust to the way the situation demands," said Imran, cautioning the pace unit of what challenges might lie ahead for them this Asia Cup, overcoming which might lead to another notable moment like that of Rubel's in 2015.

