

Tigers, SL spirited despite injury plagues

SPORTS REPORTER

Having been hit by injuries of late, both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka will begin their quest for regional supremacy today when they face off in their Asia Cup opener in Kandy.

As the competition moves to the 50-over format after Sri Lanka won the T20I title last time, this edition of the Asia Cup has emerged as a platform to gain momentum ahead of this year's ICC ODI World Cup in October.

"The Asia Cup is not a small tournament; it has history and some major games. We are taking this tournament seriously. If we play well here, it will boost our confidence leading up to the World Cup," Bangladesh captain Shakib Al Hasan stated at yesterday's pre-match press conference.

Bangladesh have appeared in the Asia Cup final three times in the last 11 years but are yet to win a title. Emotions have often adversely affected Bangladesh's performance, which Shakib acknowledged was the case in Dubai last year.

The Tigers have suffered major injury setbacks this time, while the hosts were forced to drop two vital players – leg spinner Wanindu Hasaranga and pacer Dushmantha Chameera – who were ruled out after being named in the original 15-member squad at the last minute.

Despite the absence of a few key players, Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka stated that the reigning champions



Despite a promising start by Asia Cup debutants Nepal, centuries from both Pakistan skipper Babar Azam and Iftikhar Ahmed enabled the 2012 champions to amass 342 for six after electing to bat first in the tournament opener in Multan yesterday. In the process, Babar became the fastest batter to hit 19 ODI tons and starred in a 214-run stand for the fifth-wicket with Iftikhar, leading to an Asia Cup record.

PHOTO: AFP



Bangladesh against Sri Lanka in ODIs				
Matches	Won	Lost	NR	
51	9	40	2	
Bangladesh against Sri Lanka in Asia Cup ODIs				
Matches	Won	Lost	NR	
13	2	11	0	
Top Bangladeshi run-getter against Sri Lanka in Asia Cup ODIs				
Mushfiqur Rahim				
Matches	Runs	HS	Avg.	SR
6	207	144	34.50	87.34
Top Bangladeshi wicket-taker against Sri Lanka in Asia Cup ODIs				
Abdur Razzak				
Matches	Wickets	BB	Avg.	Econ.
4	6	3/55	35.16	5.86

will not be intimidated by any team this edition.

"We are playing in our backyard, so we have the home advantage. There are a few players not participating due to injury, but still I think we have got a pretty good side who can challenge all the teams," said Shanaka, adding that the hosts are under no form of pressure despite injury worries.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, will have to find the right combination for their crucial campaign opener after opener Liton Das was ruled out at the last minute owing to fever. Anamul Haque Bijoy, a stumper-batter, has already joined the team in Sri Lanka as Liton's replacement.

Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Naim Sheikh, two young openers, remain the team's two specialist starting options. It will be intriguing to watch if skipper Shakib Al Hasan and coach Hathurusingha eventually come up with something innovative.

Shakib and Mushfiqur Rahim will have to shoulder a lot of burden in the Tigers' middle order, while the likes of Najmul Hossain Shanto and Towhid Hridoy will also hold the key in the batting department.

Meanwhile, on the bowling front, Mustafizur Rahman is also suffering from knee problems, and the team management will almost certainly wait until the last minute for the 'Fizz' to be able to include the seasoned seamer in the starting eleven.

Apart from Mustafizur, the pace battery will consist of Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Shoriful Islam, and a rookie in Tanzim Hasan Sakib, while Shakib and Mehedi Hasan Miraz will lead the spin department.

Opportunity there, but will it be grabbed?

SPORTS REPORTER

A big call was made yesterday when Anamul Haque Bijoy was included in Bangladesh's Asia Cup squad as a replacement for Liton Das, who was suffering from a fever that saw him miss the Sri Lanka-bound flight on August 27 with the rest of the Tigers' contingent.

The Tigers' selection panel waited till the last minute to announce Anamul as Liton's replacement, a decision that raised eyebrows as Anamul had neither been in the 32-member preliminary squad for the Asia Cup nor was he added to the camp when preparations for the six-nation tournament had begun.

Even though Shakib Al Hasan regarded Anamul as a "like-for-like replacement" for Liton at the top order, while also saying the team needed a backup wicket-keeper, the Bangladesh skipper did not deny how much the team would miss the services of a seasoned campaigner like Liton at the top of the order, especially in a tournament of such magnitude.

"Of course, he [Liton] is a big miss as he was part of this team for the last four-five years consistently and has been playing very well in the last couple of years," Shakib said during the pre-match press conference in Kandy yesterday.

Shakib, however, also sees it as an opportunity for others to step up.

"This [Liton's absence] will give someone else an opportunity and I hope that whoever gets that opportunity will grab it with both hands," the skipper hoped.

How far will Bangladesh make it into the continental championship will depend heavily on whether Shakib's hopes to see someone else "grab the opportunity" materialise. For that to happen, the Tigers' team management might have to make a



number of adjustments to the top of the order.

Shakib might have said that Anamul was a "like-for-like" replacement for Liton, but according to sources close to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), the need for putting up a left-right combination in the opening slot might have played a role in calling up a right-handed Anamul who could pair with a left-handed opener Naim. However, it still does not guarantee Anamul a spot in the starting eleven.

Meanwhile, questions also remain over how much confidence the team management puts in on two young openers – Naim and Tanzid Tamim.

So, who could be the ones handed the responsibility to face the music with the new ball today or even in the ensuing games in this Asia Cup? Will it be any of the three recognised openers now available in the squad? Or, will Bangladesh be bold and try something new and different?

Shakib did not totally rule out the possibility of the latter.

Asked if Shakib could promote himself up the order, the wily 36-year-old all-rounder replied: "Even if I have that plan, I can't tell you that. But definitely, we have some plans. We have an opportunity to test our backup players, newcomers will have the chance to do something well."

As things stand, whichever way the Tigers might prefer to go in the tournament for their opening slot – whether it is to give in to their long-known penchant for fielding a left-right combination by opting for Naim alongside Anamul, or to put two left-handers in Naim and Tanzid Tamim, or make a drastic promotion from down the order – one thing is certain that the top-order challenge has gotten more intensified for the Tigers for this Asia Cup.



As usual, a lot will be expected from Taskin Ahmed to spearhead the Bangladesh bowling attack when the Tigers play their opening Asia Cup match against Sri Lanka in Kandy today.

PHOTO: AFP

‘Fantastic to see equal match fees’

REUTERS

The England & Wales Cricket Board (ECB) has increased match fees for the women's team to bring them in line with the men's team, the governing body said on Wednesday.

The increase takes effect immediately, starting with the three-match Twenty20 series against Sri Lanka starting on Thursday.

The decision follows record-breaking crowds at the Women's Ashes series in June and July, where the total attendance was 110,000 and all three ODIs were sold out.

"It's fantastic to see equal match fees," England women's captain Heather Knight said. "I'm sure this will make cricket an increasingly attractive sport to girls and young women as we continue to grow the game."

The change was recommended in a report released by the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket last month, which said the women's match fees were 25% of the men's for white-ball matches and 15% for Test matches.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Actor Zahid Hasan poses with BFF officials at the launch of the BFF Football Academy yesterday. The non-residential academy will train interested footballers aged between eight and 14 three days a week for a monthly fee of Tk 3000.

Wawrinka rolls back the years

REUTERS

Former US Open champion Stan Wawrinka said he still had the game for the grandest stage after the Swiss veteran became the oldest man to win a singles contest at the tournament since a 40-year-old Jimmy Connors in 1992.

The 38-year-old Wawrinka, who claimed the last of his three Grand Slam titles at New York in 2016, outclassed Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka 7-6(5) 6-2 6-4, moving with ease despite foot issues that have plagued him in recent years.

"I think I'm playing well. I'm not trying to compare from the past because it's never good idea to compare a few years ago what I was doing," Wawrinka told reporters.

Wawrinka made his comeback to the tennis circuit in March 2022 after more than a year out following two operations on his left foot, returning to the top 100 in the world earlier this season to currently sit 49th.

He said he had no intention of slowing down in the twilight of his career.

"You also want to push yourself to the maximum, be the better player, best as possible. Of course, you're going to have up and downs in your career, with some positive emotions when you win, some tough ones when you lose," Wawrinka said.

"I never forgot why I started playing tennis and what I was dreaming when I was young ... to play the U.S. Open, play Grand Slams, big tournaments, ATP tournaments, to be there. I'm happy I can still play at that level."



India reach SL ahead of Pakistan clash

India yesterday reached Sri Lanka ahead of a much-anticipated clash, their Asia Cup campaign opener against Pakistan, on Saturday inallekele. The fiery rivals, who only play against each other in international tournaments due to the countries' long-standing political tensions, could clash as many as three times if they go all the way in the six-nation continental championship. India captain Rohit Sharma said the Asia Cup was the perfect place to "test ourselves, try and put ourselves under pressure and respond to that pressure."