

More ‘wonders’ in store?

SPORTS REPORTER

With Bangladesh getting twin centuries, from Najmul Hossain Shanto and Mehedi Hasan Miraz, only for the fifth time in ODIs, the crucial role that the ‘Tigers’ bowling unit played to beat Afghanistan by 89 runs went under the radar in Lahore on Sunday.

Shanto and Miraz centuries did see the Tigers post their highest-ever ODI total in the Asia Cup and laid the platform for a big win, but the comprehensive margin of win that eventually saw the Tigers through to the Super Four would not have materialised without the concerted bowling effort from Taskin Ahmed and Co.

In what was a must-win game for Bangladesh, the prospect of having to improve the net run-rate only made the challenge steeper for the Tigers, especially for the bowlers as they needed to bundle out the opposition with enough runs in hand, and that too on a batting-friendly surface at the Gaddafi Stadium.

One thing that made things even tougher for the Tigers was the team management’s decision to go with five specialist bowlers, reducing options for skipper Shakib Al Hasan if any of the frontline bowlers had a bad day.

However, Taskin, Shoriful Islam, and Hasan Mahmud – regarded as part of arguably the best pace bowling unit the country has ever had – lived up to their billing.

The pace trio combined for eight wickets to bundle out the Afghans for 245. Taskin led the charge with four wickets, Shoriful took three and had the most impact as



he gave crucial breakthroughs while Mahmud scalped one as they portrayed guile in their way of operation on a ground known to aid batters.

“I think it was a difficult task for the pacers on a batting-friendly surface. Yes, the batters put up a big total but what I liked was the way our seamers adapted to the condition and showed good standard. Our bowlers remained consistent and also bowled with good pace,” Taskin’s mentor and local pace bowling coach Mahbub Ali Zaki told The Daily Star yesterday.

According to Zaki, going with five specialist bowlers only showed the faith put in the pace unit by the skipper.

“What prompted Shakib to go with five specialist bowlers was probably the belief he had on the pace attack. The pacers have been well organised recently and bowled according to the plan which gives the luxury to the captain,” Zaki added.

Even in the first game when the Tigers were bundled out for a mere 164 runs against Sri Lanka, the bowlers did manage to put pressure by picking up early wickets. However, the task proved too much with a small target on the board.

Shakib also praised the bowlers’ effort after the game on Sunday, saying that the pacers have been doing the trick for the Tigers for some time now.

With even bigger challenges awaiting the Tigers in the Asia Cup, Zaki believes that the pacers would now need to bank on their strength.

“Look, Taskin is a furious attacker and is proven in world cricket while Mahmud is relatively new and relies on his variations. Shoriful can swing the ball and likes to attack the batter. So, we have a good variety in our pace unit. I think it will be important we bank on our strength and I believe this unit can do wonders in the coming days for Bangladesh,” he said.



Sri Lanka batter Kusal Mendis does keepy-uppy during a net session of his team, who will take on Afghanistan in a crucial Group B encounter of the Asia Cup in Lahore today. Having beaten Bangladesh convincingly in their first match, the Lankans are on top of the group and favourites to progress to Super 4 stage, barring a massive-margin defeat today. (Bottom) Bangladesh batter Liton Das flew to Lahore last night to join the squad for tomorrow’s Super 4 fixture against Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP/COLLECTED

Team combinations come to fore ahead of Super 4

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh opener and ODI vice-captain Liton Das departed for Pakistan yesterday but it remains unclear whether Liton would be part of the playing eleven against Pakistan in Lahore on Wednesday in the first Super Four game of the ongoing Asia Cup.

Liton had been suffering from fever which led to him being ruled out of the Asia Cup. He recovered a few days back but Anamul Haque Bijoy had already been sent as a “like-for-like” replacement.

“Liton is now doing fine. There are a few injury concerns in the team [Asia Cup squad]. We need to discuss these injury issues with the team management and find out if any replacement is required,” chief selector Minhajul Abedin had told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Tigers would have a few combination-related worries to sort out before their crucial Super Four opener. There had been instability in the opening slot with Mohammad Naim not quite finding his feet with a big score while the big stage was always going to be intimidating for the young opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim.

Following the debacle in the first group match against Sri Lanka, the Tigers brought in Mehedi Hasan Miraz, who answered the team’s call with an authoritative ton. Najmul Hossain, who continued his form with the bat, took Tigers to a strong total which would bring some much-needed confidence to the batting unit.

However, every opponent has a definitive threat lying in wait for the Tigers in this tournament. Facing the likes of Shaheen Shah, Naseem Shah and Harris Rauf would bring different challenges to the table. The new ball would be important for Pakistan and thus the onus will be on

Tigers to counter it.

Would Miraz be able to negotiate the seam and swing that Pakistan attack usually gets even on flat surfaces? The presence of a left-handed opener would be one of the mechanisms the management can go for to protect the right-handers against Shaheen’s in duckers. Thus, Naim or Tanzid will remain in the picture.

Miraz, meanwhile, may not appear as an opener if Liton is fit enough to play. Given that the new ball may not do much in Pakistani conditions, Miraz will be an

option as opener once more. According to BCB sources, the team management does not prefer changing a winning combination.

Miraz was used to counter Mujeeb Ur Rahman’s threat early against Afghanistan. With no such spin threat foreseeable against Pakistan at the start of the innings, could plans change?

“Actually, I am always ready for any bowler because it’s a new journey for me. If I can’t play in the opening slot, I can play in the top-order if the team management gives me an opportunity,” Miraz had said about the prospect of facing Pakistan pace attack after

the Afghanistan match.

The team management, moreover, would need to focus on the number seven and eight spots too. Shamim Hossain and Afif Hossain seem to be providing similar profiles in those positions, with the latter more suited up the order.

However, the need to bolster the lower-middle order to face up to top-order collapse may be the idea going into the Pakistan game. The absence of a sixth bowler, provided Mahedi Hasan remains out of contention, means the Tigers would have to precariously balance risk and advantages in setting up the eleven against Pakistan.



U-16s stay afloat

SPORTS REPORTER

A second-half strike from Ashikur Rahman saw Bangladesh keep their hopes of qualifying for the semifinals of the SAFF U-16 Championship alive with a 1-0 win over Nepal in their second and final group match at the Changlimithang Stadium in Bhutan yesterday.

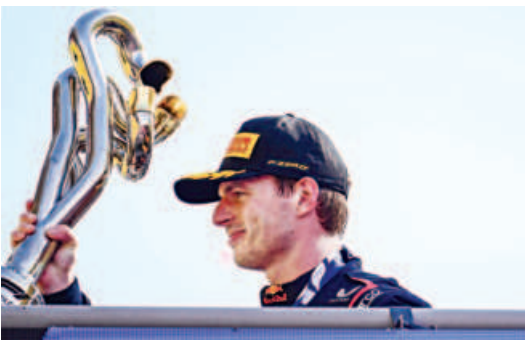
The triumph helped the boys in red and green to have equal three points as group leaders India, who are ahead due to better goal difference.

Now, Bangladesh’s fate of moving into the last-four battle depends on the outcome of the final group game between Nepal and India. Any result other than a defeat for India will see Bangladesh in the semifinals.

It was a must-win game for Bangladesh, having lost to India 1-0 in the first game.

Bangladesh missed a few chances in the first half but Ashikur headed in from a corner to score the only goal yesterday.

After conceding, Nepal pushed harder for an equaliser but the Bangladeshi defenders kept their nerves and thwarted all the Nepal attacks.



Verstappen’s record 10th straight F1 win

AFP, Monza

Max Verstappen won a record-breaking 10th straight Formula One race on Sunday after coming out on top at the Italian Grand Prix in a show of force from Red Bull at Monza.

Reigning world champion Verstappen dominated on a beautiful day in northern Italy which left Ferrari fans disappointed, with Verstappen’s teammate Sergio Perez finishing second ahead of home hope and pole-sitter Carlos Sainz.

Spaniard Sainz crossed more than 11 seconds back in third, unable to resist the power of Verstappen, the runaway leader of the drivers’ championship.

Verstappen extended his lead on teammate Sergio Perez at the top of the drivers’ standings to 145 points and also ensured that Red Bull maintained their perfect record with 14 wins from as many GPs this season.

The 29-year-old has now won 12 of this season’s races and is all but certain to claim his third consecutive F1 title after breaking a record he shared with Sebastian Vettel by winning in Zandvoort last weekend.

Swiatek stumped by ‘loss of control’

AFP, New York

Iga Swiatek said she was at a loss to describe the way in which her US Open title defence was left in ruins Sunday in a last-16 defeat to Latvia’s Jelena Ostapenko.

The Pole lost for the fourth time in as many meetings with the talented but inconsistent Ostapenko, who roared back to clinch a 3-6, 6-3, 6-1 victory after dominating the final two sets.

“She plays well against me. I mean, I don’t have any comparison because she always did that,” said Swiatek.

“But I’m just surprised that my level changed so drastically because usually when I play bad, I play bad at the beginning, then I kind of catch up or just problem solve. This time it was totally the opposite.

“I don’t really know what happened with my game. I felt no control suddenly. I just have to watch and see ‘cause, yeah, I didn’t really know why I started making so many mistakes.”

The 22-year-old Swiatek will lose her status as world number one following the US Open, with Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus set to take over top spot.

Swiatek had cruised into the fourth round in New York after not dropping a set in her first three matches, looking in prime form to defend the title she won last year.

But Sunday’s defeat will snap her 75-week reign at the summit.



“Usually I’m not looking at numbers, but overall I love them. I would love to, like, extend this record a little bit longer,” said Swiatek, a five-time Grand Slam champion.

“This is something that when I was younger, I actually kind of wanted to break some record or have something.

“I already did that ‘cause I already won a Slam as a first Polish player. Obviously being No. 1 as the third player in history is great.

“But for sure when it happens, when you lose it, there are some sad emotions.

“All these great players know it’s going to come back if you’re going to work hard, focus on the right things, just develop as a player.”



Inter Miami’s Argentine talisman Lionel Messi celebrates after assisting Leonardo Campana during their 3-1 win over Major League Soccer fixture against Los Angeles FC in Los Angeles yesterday. It was the most impressive display from Inter Miami in their Messi era, with two assists from the Argentine boosting their playoff hopes.

PHOTO: AFP