



## Can pacers play to potential in Pune?

MAZHAR UDDIN from Pune

There had been a lot of hype surrounding Bangladesh's pace-bowling unit ahead of the ICC World Cup, having made significant strides in the last few years.

The likes of Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Shoriful Islam, and Hasan Mahmud managed to gain the confidence of the team management with their consistent ability to pose a threat to the opposing batters, prompting the team management to keep its faith in the seamers intact.

Considering current year's records, the impact of Bangladeshi pacers speaks for itself as they managed to turn the table in their favour with 94 wickets, which is 32 more than their spin unit's tally. However, Bangladesh's seamers have been underwhelming in their three World Cup games so far. Despite defeating Afghanistan in the tournament opener, skipper Shakib Al Hasan mentioned after the game that he expected the pacers to contribute more to the team's cause.

From then on, the situation quickly deteriorated as the Tigers went on to lose their next two games, both in convincing ways, against England and New Zealand. Although Batting display has been the standout disappointment, Bangladesh quicks also performed below par.



PHOTO: AFP/FACEBOOK

Shoriful, along with Shakib, has taken the most wickets, 5, for Bangladesh thus far in the tournament but the left-arm pacer's economy rate, 6.28, remained on the higher side.

Probably the biggest concern for the Tigers' pace unit would be Taskin, who was expected to lead the Bangladesh pace battery in the flagship event. Taskin seems to be struggling to find his rhythm, evidenced by his two wickets and an economy of 6.30. He was unable to bowl full quota of overs in each of the three matches, while his pace appears to have slowed a few notches.

Mustafizur Rahman, another experienced bowler, must also fire on all cylinders as the 'Cutter Master' has only two wickets to his name.

Despite the fact that the Indian conditions were predicted to help spinners more, pacers are among the four out of top five wicket-takers in this tournament.

Allan Donald, Bangladesh's pace-bowling coach, has been instrumental in creating the new-look Bangladesh pace outfit. The South Africa great was spotted working closely with his charges during yesterday's training session at Pune's Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium ahead of their India clash on Thursday.

Given the Indian batters' rich vein of form, spearheaded by captain Rohit Sharma, Bangladesh could choose to feature their fifth pace option in Tanzim Hasan Sakib after he impressed on his international debut last month. In that match, against India in the Asia Cup, the right arm seamer removed the Indian captain in his second delivery.

If Bangladesh fail to make the first Powerplay count on both batting and bowling yet again, Tigers' prospect to return to winning ways becomes much more difficult. Thus, Mustafizur and company will be desperate to produce early inroads and regain their confidence as the pressure mounts on the side.

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Afghanistan spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman will be eager for another brilliant spell after the triumph over England while New Zealand opener Devon Conway will look to keep Afghanistan attack in check and continue his fine form.

## Another Afghan fairytale or Kiwi surge?

AGENCIES

Afghanistan will be high on confidence when they take on undefeated New Zealand at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai today after pulling off the first upset in the ongoing ICC World Cup against defending Champions England in their previous match.

And the pitch in Chennai, which is expected to suit them more than the Kiwis, can provide another opportunity for Mujeeb Ur Rahman and Rashid Khan spin duo to shock the last edition's runners-up.

Afghanistan's shock win over defending champions provided some spice to the mega event and has given the side a new stature and, thus, New Zealand would not underestimate Hashmatullah Shahidi's side.

New Zealand are going great guns in the tournament, having won all three matches so far and are currently placed second on the points table, trailing India on net run rate. Afghanistan, meanwhile, would be keen to create another big upset and put their World Cup campaign firmly on track.

Afghanistan had an inauspicious

start to their campaign after losing to Bangladesh and India before leaving Jos Buttler's England in a tizzy with a memorable 69-run win in New Delhi on Sunday.

Wicketkeeper-batter Tom Latham will again lead New Zealand after their charismatic skipper Kane Williamson

pacer Tim Southee finally gets a chance to feature in the mega event, having recovered from a thumb injury, although his match fitness has remained an issue.

The Kiwis will rely heavily on their top-order comprising Will Young, Devon Conway and Daryl Mitchell, while all-rounder Rachin Ravindra, with his impactful performances across departments, will also be the player to watch.

New Zealand batters would certainly have analysed the Afghan spin trio of Mujeeb, Rashid and Mohammed Nabi, given they accounted for eight England wickets.

As for the Afghanistan batting, opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz is the man in form, having scored 50-plus in two matches so far, while the likes of skipper Shahidi, Azmatullah Omarzai and Ikram Alikhil could come in handy as well.

While Trent Boult and Matt Henry's soaring pace will be feared by the Afghan batters, their main challenge could come from the spin duo of Ravindra and Mitchell Santner, with the latter being the most successful slow bowler in the competition so far.

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suffered a fracture on his left thumb during their match against Bangladesh and was ruled out for a few games.

Despite the huge setback, the Kiwis would be banking on their success so far to win their fourth game on the trot against an unpredictable Afghanistan.

It would be interesting to see if

The sides only met twice in the ODIs – in the 2015 World Cup and 2019 World Cup – and New Zealand sealed comfortable win each time.

Among the players in their current squads, New Zealand's Trent Boult and Kane Williamson and Afghanistan's Mohammad Nabi and Najibullah Zadran played on both occasions.

Afghanistan are yet to play at Chennai's MA Chidambaram Stadium, while New Zealand won two – against Bangladesh and Kenya – of their four matches at the venue.

“For us it's about trying to adapt to each surface as best we can. Some surfaces may be different to others and they may change throughout a 50-over innings... if we do that I think that gives us a good chance.”

New Zealand stand-in skipper Tom Latham

“India was our home for two to three years... in this ground we had our preparation camp for the 2019 World Cup. We spent 40 days here... the conditions are the same as in Afghanistan. That gives us extra advantage.”

Afghanistan skipper Hashmatullah Shahidi

## 'Laid back' Rohit raises India's hopes

AFP, New Delhi

Rohit Sharma has led India from the front in their three unbeaten matches of the World Cup to boost his cricket-mad nation's hopes of winning the title at home.

The Indian captain has already amassed 217 runs including a record century against Afghanistan, showing no signs of the pressure on his shoulders.

Rohit succeeded superstar Virat Kohli as white-ball captain in 2021 with the aim of securing the national team a third World Cup and first international title since the 2013 Champions Trophy.

Australia great Ricky Ponting lavished praise on Rohit for handling the pressure of the job with ease.

“Someone like Virat, who is a bit more heart-on-the-sleeve, and probably listens to the fans and plays up with the fans a little bit more, someone with his personality would probably find it a bit harder,” Ponting wrote in an International Cricket Council column on Tuesday.

“But I think Rohit will be fine with it. He's a terrific bloke and has been a



World Cup in Australia last year.

Rohit has never let expectations get to him and Ponting, once his captain at Mumbai and then coach, said the veteran batsman takes pressure in his stride.

“He's very laid back,” said Ponting. “You can even see that by the way that he plays. He's a pretty laconic sort of batsman as well, and that's the way he is both on and off the field.”

Rohit, an opening batsman nicknamed “Hitman” for his ability to get big scores quickly, was out for a duck in the team's opening win against Australia, but was lauded for his captaincy moves.

He soon regained form with 131 against Afghanistan as he surpassed compatriot Sachin Tendulkar with a record seventh World Cup century.

His ton in 63 balls was the fastest by an Indian in a World Cup to better Kapil Dev's hundred in 72 balls against Zimbabwe in 1983.

Rohit took his form to the hotly-anticipated clash with arch-rivals Pakistan and smashed a match-winning 86 to thrash the opposition as India climbed to the top of the 10-team World Cup table.

great player for a long time, and he's done a great job as leader of India.”

Rohit, 36, has enjoyed franchise success as a skipper with five IPL titles with the Mumbai Indians and then led India to the Asia Cup title last month in a key test of form ahead of the World Cup.

That success would have helped ease a little of the pain suffered when, under his captaincy, India were defeated in the semi-finals of the T20



Netherlands captain Scott Edwards (R) celebrates with teammate Colin Ackermann after taking the catch of South Africa's Quinton de Kock in their ICC Cricket World Cup match at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamshala yesterday. Edwards helped his side post 245 for eight with an unbeaten 69-ball 78 in the first innings.

PHOTO: AFP

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