

Kiwis hope to capitalise on Tigers' inexperience

SPORTS REPORTER

The New Zealand and Bangladesh team management sort of stand on the opposite side of the spectrum as they prepare to open their latest World Test Championship cycle through the two-match Test series, beginning with the first game in Sylhet tomorrow.

While Bangladesh's head coach felt it was time to move on from some of the experienced campaigners who have performed for the side over the years in order to begin a new chapter in the country's cricket, the Kiwis are hoping to take advantage of just that.

The Tigers will be without a number of their key players as names like Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Liton Das, and Taskin Ahmed are not available for the series.

According to Luke Ronchi, the Black Caps' head coach for the tour, it indeed has come as a blessing, considering how the Tigers would be missing out on the edge had the experienced bunch been there.

"Definitely, they are experienced and they have played a lot of international cricket and they have been massive for Bangladesh for a long time. To not have them there, from a spectators' point of view is disappointing, but from our point of view when you have to play against them and to not have to do that this time is a nice thing," Ronchi said.

However, despite the fact that the Tigers are missing a number of their regular performers, Ronchi refused to take things lightly against the Najmul Hossain Shanto-led side.

"It's their country and their conditions; they play here really well. So, just have to make sure we challenge them as much as possible and make their batters work hard to score runs while also making their bowlers find it hard to pick wickets. Obviously, with the quality of pace and spin in both sides, it's going to be really hard and that's where the game will sort of change as to how well they can bowl and how each team can play against those attacks," he added.

Even though Bangladesh are known to find a way to trap opponents in their spin web, Ronchi also expects the pitch in Sylhet to offer bounce and carry.

"I think that's the nature of cricket in Bangladesh – there's a lot more spinners involved. But the surface here, we did hear there can be some pace and bounce on it. But also, the sort of surface on which we practiced, we expect a little bit more bounce," he said.



Cricketer Shakib Al Hasan, flanked by Awami League activists, walks in front of the Gono Bhavan yesterday as he was nominated from the ruling party for the Magura-1 constituency for upcoming national parliamentary elections. Shakib was one of only two sports personalities to get fresh nominations, the other being Bangladesh Cricket Board director Shafiqul Alam Chowdhury Nadel from Moulvibazar-2 constituency. Former national team captain and incumbent Member of Parliament Naimur Rahman Durjoy, however, didn't get nomination this time around.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN



After a day off, both New Zealand and Bangladesh trained yesterday at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium ahead of the first of the two-match Test series starting tomorrow. Kane Williamson geared up to enjoy a betting session while a few of the Bangladesh players, including Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Shadman Islam, honed their fielding skills.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Hathurusingha keen on testing young guns

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh will be without key figures such as Tamim Iqbal, Shakib Al Hasan, Liton Das and Taskin Ahmed along with pacer Ebadot Hossain for the upcoming two-match Test series against New Zealand, scheduled in Sylhet tomorrow.

There are three newcomers in the squad in the form of pacer Hasan Mahmud, spinner Hasan Murad and batter Shahadat Hossain Dipu while Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Zakir Hasan and Shadman Islam will have to fill the big shoes left by opener Tamim Iqbal.

In absence of Taskin and Ebadot, the likes of Hasan, Shoriful Islam and Khaled Ahmed will have to take charge of the pace attack in the series.

Coming off the back of a World Cup where the team failed to play to their potential and getting into the Test format was already a challenge. Not having some of the regular Test faces should make the task even more difficult.

"Most of the other players have been playing NCL and as you know it's almost like a new-look Bangladesh team for various reasons, not by design," Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha said at the press conference in Sylhet yesterday.

When Hathurusingha arrived in Bangladesh for his second stint, it was being assumed that he



would oversee the senior players' final years. With the World Cup target now already out of the way, Hathurusingha feels that time has come to ready the next batch who would take over from the likes of Tamim and Shakib.

"It's challenging to lose that much of experience from any team, especially for Bangladesh as those guys have been part of the team in every format for more than 15 years, some of them for some 10 years. So it's in one side for everybody and for us it's something to look forward to in order to see what the youngsters can do. I think it's time that we move on from some of the players who played for a long time. They are not going to be there forever. But this is happening for many

reasons so I think it's exciting and it's an opportunity for some of the youngsters to make their name and have long careers," the Sri Lankan said.

Najmul Hossain Shanto has been appointed as the skipper in Shakib's absence. Hathurusingha suggested that there was no pressure on the new skipper, instead it is an opportunity for.

"No, [pressure] nothing. The new captain, it's an opportunity for him to create his own leadership group, his own way of leading. So he will be different. It's an opportunity for him as well as the other players also to get used to the way he leads. I'm really excited for all these changes," the head coach said, suggesting that a long-term view regarding the Test captaincy is perhaps being considered.

The head coach said that spinners will have a big role but the conditions and wicket remain 'unknown'.

Bangladesh won possibly their greatest match against the Kiwis at Mount Maunganui last year. Shakib and Tamim were missing in that series too but two other seniors -- Mushfiqur Rahim and Mominul Haque -- were there and will be available this time as well. But Bangladesh's veterans opting out of one format or the other had created a stir in the past and a new era, if one is to begin, is similar to the unknown conditions the team may face in Sylhet.

IPL teams release Shakib, Liton, Mustafizur

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, opener Liton Das, and left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman were released by their respective Indian Premier League (IPL) sides ahead of the auction in Dubai on December 19.

Shakib and Liton represented two-time winners Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) in the 2023 edition of the tournament, while Mustafizur featured for Delhi Capitals.

All three players still would have a chance to get picked up from the auction.

After remaining unpicked in 2022, Shakib was roped in for a second time by KKR for the following season. However, the all-rounder pulled out of the tournament without playing any matches due to personal reasons.

Wicketkeeper batter Liton, on the other hand, got to feature for the KKR in a solitary match in which he scored four runs and missed out on a stumping.

Mustafizur was brought in by Delhi for a base price of Rs 2 crores but a lacklustre display, which saw him take one wicket in two matches at an economy rate of 11.29, did not allow him to make the eleven further down the competition.

Shakib and Liton are two of 12 players to have been released by KKR. The franchise retained West Indies duo Andre Russel and Sunil Narine but let go of Lockie Ferguson, Tim Southee, Johnson Charles, and David Wiese amongst the foreign ranks.

Djokovic takes 'responsibility' for Davis Cup defeat

AFP, Malaga

Novak Djokovic said he accepts responsibility for Serbia's Davis Cup semi-final defeat by Italy on Saturday after failing to convert three match points against Jannik Sinner.

The world number one had his Italian counterpart on the ropes in the second singles rubber at 5-4 up, but allowed Sinner to recover and win 6-2, 2-6, 7-5 to force the doubles decider.

Djokovic and Miomir Kecmanovic, who had won the opening singles rubber against Lorenzo Musetti, were defeated by Sinner and Lorenzo Sonego 6-3, 6-4 and leave Malaga disappointed.

"For me personally it's a huge disappointment, because I take the responsibility, obviously having three match points, being so close to win it," Djokovic told reporters.

"Yeah, it's unfortunate really. This is sport. When you lose for your country, you know, the bitter feeling is even greater."

Djokovic said it was "tough to swallow" the defeat, in a competition he was desperate to win with Serbia for the second time after their only triumph in 2010, which he was part of.

The 36-year-old Serb, a record 24-time men's Grand Slam winner, said he thought world number four Sinner's level might dip, but the Italian was relentless.

"I know Jannik's quality, but, you know, I was thinking maybe he's gonna drop a little bit, you know, in the doubles, but he didn't," said Djokovic.

Djokovic also congratulated Sinner, who has now beaten him three times in four matches across 11 days.

Kings keen to keep winning in their arena

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings are keen to maintain their winning run at home when they take on visiting Maziya Sports & Recreation Club in their penultimate Group D match of the AFC Cup at the Bashundhara Kings Arena today.

The match will kick off at 6:00pm with T-Sports telecasting the match live from the venue.

The four-time Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) champions are leading the four-team Group D with seven points from four matches.

A win over the Maldivian outfit will take them to the brink of realising their dreams of reaching the knockout stage for the first time in four attempts.

"We are just focusing on the real importance of the game and on what is going to happen inside the pitch," Kings' Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon said in the pre-match press conference yesterday.

"We have been doing beautiful work with our players and are identifying the strong points of Maziya that we want to neutralise and trying to understand where are their weaknesses to try and capitalise on them," said the Spaniard at the Kings Arena.

The Kings had begun their campaign in



this year's AFC Cup with a 3-1 away defeat to Maziya, their first ever loss against the Maldivian outfits.

Bruzon said that his charges are feeling confident ahead of the return fixture and are determined to continue their undefeated streak in international competitions at their home ground.

The Kings have won all four of their previous AFC Cup ties at the Kings Arena, defeating Maldivian outfits TC Sports Club 5-1 in 2019 and Maziya 1-0 in 2022, Odisha FC 3-2 and Mohun Bagan 2-1 this year.

"We have played three [four] matches at Kings arena and we have never lost. I don't call that luck. In terms of confidence, the confidence is full and absolute. The boys are working well and we are the same Bashundhara which played the last game here."

The Kings will step into the field with memories of their maiden win over Indian club Mohun Bagan Super Giants still fresh.

In that game, Kings' Brazilian forward Robson Da Silva scored his team's second and decisive goal.

The Kings, however, could be without their Brazilian captain against Maziya who returned to training for the first time on Saturday since the Mohun Bagan match.

Bruzon kept his lips tight about Robson's availability.

"We don't want to leak the information from inside. We are having some problems in the form of injuries. The calendar is tough with the continuity and discontinuity," Bruzon said.

"Robson has made a difference when we have big games... We are going to try to do everything to have all our players available. If our captain is not there, then Plan B is going to be a plan that will work," he added.

Maziya's Bosnian coach Milimir Sestija said that his team is keen to put up their best performance against the hosts.

"Bashundhara Kings is one of the best teams in our group and we will try to play our best against the good team. We are motivated and inspired to play against good teams like Bashundhara Kings."

In the other Group D match of the day, second-placed Mohun Bagan, who are equal on points with the Kings but are trailing them because of their head-to-head results against them, will take on third-placed Odisha FC at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata.