

## True test of Shanto’s mettle

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When Najmul Hossain Shanto expressed his willingness to lead Bangladesh in all three formats ahead of the first Test in Sylhet, not many would have envisioned him guiding the Tigers to an emphatic victory in his very first assignment as captain in the format.

But he did so in style, leading from the front and becoming the first Bangladeshi cricketer to score a Test century on his captaincy debut.

Shanto has always been considered the one who has the potential to lead the Tigers in the future. However, his fluctuating form in his initial years, which he now has seemingly overcome as he transformed into a reliable warrior with the willow in the Tigers’ top order, has always hindered him from getting to the captaincy mantle that everyone has tipped him for since the age-level days.

How often has a promise fizzled out with only early glimpses in Bangladesh cricket? The answer to this is very familiar and also an unpleasant one.

Will that be the case with Shanto? Doubts may creep in, simply considering that this is Bangladesh cricket where good things come sporadically.

And that’s what makes the second Test against New Zealand, starting today in Mirpur, much more than just another game for Shanto. The match being a part of the latest World Test Championship cycle makes the contest bear extra weight, but for the 25-year-old, it comes as an opportunity to prove that he is indeed worthy of getting the promotion from his current designation of stand-in skipper.

“The job is half done. We’ll have to work for five more days for that victory,” were the words uttered by Shanto after the win in Sylhet, showing that he knows how to keep



his emotions in check even after a commanding 150-run win against one of the top Test nations. More importantly, it also relayed a message that Shanto is not one to let up after one flash of brilliance – a trait that needs to be at the core of any leader.

What made Shanto steal focus and praise in the Sylhet match was not only the Tigers’ overall complete performance in a format that they have always found difficult to assert dominance in but also because of how he made his presence felt in the middle.

Setting those aggressive field positions, making timely and effective bowling changes that paid dividends on most occasions, and dialling down from his over-aggressive batting approach in the first innings to a more time-appropriate one in the second during the Sylhet Test – all these impactful executions were bound to see Shanto hailed as the next long-term captain. Even the case of Mominul Haque picking up wickets whenever called upon showed the guile of the captain who was unafraid of taking a chance and dared to do something different when chips were down.

What augurs well for Bangladesh cricket, which is going through a phase of instability following a World Cup debacle is that, according to head coach Chandika Hathurusingha, Shanto has already acquired the mould of a true leader as he is “commanding respect and demanding the standard” from his players.

However, all these words of appreciation and admiration may as well fade if Shanto fails to replicate his captain-like attitude on the field in the next five days. For someone like Shanto who knows first-hand how consistency in any aspect is key, he must know the Test that starts today will be his ultimate test if he truly aspires to assume the captaincy mantle for the long haul.



Bangladesh spinners had combined to scalp 18 of the 20 New Zealand wickets in Sylhet, with Taijul Islam leading the pack with a ten-wicket haul. The hosts will expect similar act from the experienced campaigner in the ‘battle of spin’, as mentioned by visiting skipper Tim Southee ahead of today’s second Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Unpredictable Mirpur to test Hathurusingha’s skillset argument

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha felt that the pitch in Mirpur for the second Test against New Zealand starting today is unpredictable but his side now have the different skillsets to match up with the conditions and opponents.

Mirpur wickets have often turned up with something different than the expectation of the team management but generally it has served slow wickets with help for spinners. But while turning tracks have not produced desired results against other subcontinental sides in the past, teams from outside the subcontinent did have trouble facing spin, especially on days four and five.

The wicket will be conditioned by Mirpur’s past, the frequency of matches relating to the tiredness of the wicket and the opponents at hand, who are from outside the subcontinent and found going difficult in Sylhet in a 150-run loss. Given that bit of uncertainty regarding the Mirpur track, the combination from the past game could serve to balance the team in Mirpur as well.

“We selected the combination according to our strengths and the conditions in Sylhet. You sometimes can’t read Mirpur until you play

couple of sessions, even. There’s so much traffic going on, in this pitch. I don’t think any venue is used so much in world cricket. We can’t predict what’s going to happen. We will try to not change much, at the moment,” Hathurusingha said at the pre-match press conference yesterday.

The head coach identified that they need to find combination with the kind of skillsets that would pay dividends in Mirpur against a side like New Zealand.

“You will have the combination depending on conditions and oppositions’ limitations, tactically,” he said, adding that the wickets for the recent Afghanistan and Ireland Tests were different from each other and also identified that because curator had time for preparing the fresh wickets for Afghanistan, they were able to play three pacers.

The wicket that will be used had very little grass ahead of the Dhaka Test and the team management may feel that combination used in the Sylhet Test could be the way forward. Thus Hathurusingha hinted pace may not be the priority even as the conditions a day before were overcast.

“We decided to go with three fast bowlers [against Afghanistan] because of the conditions and

opposition. The fact is that we have all these skillsets now. We can use the way we want,” he said about having required skillsets both in pace and spin departments.

He also added that they were guarding against complacency when the team meeting took place on Monday.

“Strong and experienced leaders like Mushy [Mushfiqur Rahim] and Mominul [Haque] spoke very emotionally. They spoke in Bengali. I can see there’s no tall poppies in the dressing room,” Hathurusingha said.

New Zealand are a bit on the backfoot after the first game and combination and the conditions were also in focus in Tim Southee’s press conference. Southee pointed out pretty directly what sort of wicket they expected.

“I think you come to this part of the world, spinners are expected to play a big role. And we saw that in the first Test match and we’re expecting similar in the second Test match,” Southee said.

Above all, however, if Mirpur does serve something different again, Tigers will be keen to see how much their skillset versatility works at home given that home advantage has often been hard to procure in their Test history.

## Naeem sets record as BCL kicks off

SPORTS REPORTER

Experienced campaigner Naeem Islam stole the spotlight on the opening day of the first round of the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) – country’s only franchise-based first-class competition -- which kicked off across two venues yesterday.

With an unbeaten 103 off 175 deliveries, featuring three sixes and six fours, Naeem fought the lone battle for North Zone as they posted 256 for eight in Sylhet.

The 36-year-old smashed his 33rd first-class hundred, setting a national record in the process, surpassing Tushar Imran’s 32 tons.

Central kept losing wickets right from the start after being sent to bat and were struggling on 63 for four, courtesy of pacer Musfik Hasan who removed the top three and ended with figures of three for 28 from his 13 overs.

Coming in at number nine, Shohidul Islam scored the second-highest 47 and added 98 runs with Naeem for the eighth wicket. Seamer Abdullah Al Mamun also made a mark with two scalps.

Meanwhile, at Chattogram’s Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium, a 158-run opening stand between Parvez Emon and Shykat Ali helped East Zone post 242 for five against South Zone.

The latter was dismissed after hitting nine fours and a six for his 77 off 150 balls. Parvez followed suit soon after scoring 90 off 167 balls, laced with seven fours and two sixes. Denying the batter a century was left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam, who eventually took three wickets as East Zone lost bearings in the middle.



People don’t believe it after three draws, but we are going to do it again. We know that it is not easy, no team has done it yet (four Premier League titles in a row) and that is why the difficulty is there.



Pep Guardiola told reporters ahead of City’s match against fourth-placed Aston Villa today.

## Kings, Mohammedan make Independence Cup semifinals

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bashundhara Kings and Mohammedan Sporting Club advanced to the semifinals of the Independence Cup after posting hard-fought victories in the last two quarterfinals at two separate venues yesterday.

Kings, two-time champions, handed a 2-1 defeat to Bangladesh Army Football Team in an intense battle at the Bashundhara Kings Arena while Mohammedan confirmed their semifinal berth for the first time in nine years with a nail-biting 1-0 win over Chittagong Abahani at Birshreshtha Shaheed Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj.

At Kings Arena, Kings did not risk playing their second-string side after being held to a goalless draw against Ctg Abahani in their last group last match, instead turned up with a full-strength side, drafting in all four foreign players against the services team, who were playing without any foreign player.

However, Army surprisingly kept their superior opponents at bay for 35 minutes before Kings’ Uzbek



PHOTO: STAR

defender Boburbek Yuldashov broke the deadlock in the 36th minute with a close-range header off a Miguel Ferreira corner-kick.

Kings, though, could hardly expose the Army defence in the first half but they created better chances after the

break even though forwards Dorielton Gomes and Rakib Hossain squandered two good opportunities to double the lead.

Army hit back in the 61st minute, against the run of play, taking advantage from a dreadful error from

Kings’ goalkeeper Mehedi Hasan Sraban, who failed to control a back pass from a teammate. Ranjan Sikder snatched the ball to cut it back to Shahriar Emon, who placed it home to score the equaliser.

Kings did not take too much time to restore their lead as left-back Saad Uddin darted into the box to deliver a cross for unmarked Dorielton, who tapped in from close range to confirm Kings’ semifinal clash against Abahani.

Meanwhile Mohammedan, who could not get out of the quarterfinal stage of the Independence Cup since winning it last time in 2014, overcame the hurdle to set up a semifinal clash against Rahmatganj MFS.

The match in Munshiganj was basically confined in the midfield with both sides showing lack of urgency even though Mohammedan captain Soleymane Diabate wasted an easy chance to break the deadlock in the before Uzbek midfielder Muzaffarjon Muzaffarov found the back of Chittagong Abahani net with a brilliant free-kick from 25 yards out six minutes into the extra time of first-half.

## Tapu, Zico allowed to resume club training

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings’ suspended goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico and Tapu Barman have been granted permission to return to club training from December 12, one day after Kings AFC Cup group final match against Odisha FC in India.

Kings president Imrul Hasan informed reporters of the development following Kings’ 2-1 victory over Bangladesh Army FT in the Independence Cup on Tuesday. However, it has not been yet decided whether the suspensions of the two experienced players will be reduced.

Zico and Tapu had applied for exemption from their punishments, some seven weeks after the club management-imposed suspension on October 12 as the duo and three other footballers were found guilty of bringing 60 bottles of alcohol on the way back from Maldives following a 3-1 loss to Maziya S&RC in the AFC Cup in September.

As a consequence, Zico and Tapu were suspended until March 31, 2024, and December 31, 2023, respectively, while Sheikh Morsalin and Rimon Hossain were fined monetary sums and Towhidul Alam Sabuz was suspended for the season.