

Champions arrive amid festivity

SPORTS REPORTER

After becoming the country's first team to win the ACC U-19 Asia Cup, Bangladesh under-19 cricket team arrived in the country yesterday amid much fanfare.

The Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, clad in lights from a day before due to Independence Day celebrations, welcomed the young Tigers home as the champions received a fitting reception.

Bangladesh speedster Ebadot Hossain was observed recording videos from the Academy Ground rooftop, enthusiastically capturing the moments as the players turned up at the venue.

Earlier, a few kids from age group level had been eagerly awaiting their return. Once allowed to meet the players, one of the kids could be heard telling Ashiqur Rahman Shibli, centurion of the final, that the Asia Cup triumph will not be enough. "We need the World Cup, bhaiya," he said.

At the press conference, captain Mahfuzur Rahman Rabby spoke to reporters with BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury in attendance.

Asked what it feels like, Rabby said that responsibility has peaked with the win. "We became Asia Cup champions for the first time, so it's a big achievement for us," he said at the press conference yesterday.

Rabby bestowed praise on the coaching staff, in particular head coach Stuart Law and batting coach Wasim Jaffar. "We have Stuart Law sir and Wasim Jaffar sir and we got very good tips from them, especially in regards to how to come back from difficult situations and stay strong mentally," the skipper said.



Asked how they achieved their target, Rabby revealed that they took things match by match, instead of focusing on the final goal.

Shibli, who struck the ton in the final to get the U-19s to a big score, credited team spirit as the key to their success. "We won't win through individual performance or become champions if there is no bonding. Our team bonding made us champions," Shibli said.

The team had not been doing too well before the Asia Cup. However, a quadrangular series in November involving England U19s, India A and B teams in India – where they won just one game out of six – had prepared them well.

"The tournament in India was very competitive. We improved from there and that's why we did well in the Asia Cup," Rabby said.

The U-19 World Cup in January remains their biggest target at the moment. Winning an Asia Cup might not make them great players but it can be the stepping stone for big things to come; given that winning builds confidence.

"The World Cup is ahead of us and because of this [achievement] our responsibility has increased. We took very good preparation for the World Cup from the Asia Cup. "Everyone's in good touch and if we can keep being consistent, we would be able to achieve something good from the World Cup," Rabby said.

The team has shown calibre and strong mentally to read situations. The World Cup training camp will start in Dhaka before they depart for South Africa on January 1.

"We will have a week-long camp in South Africa before the Under-19 World Cup, to give our boys time to adjust with conditions," BCB game development manager, Abu Emam Mohammad Kawsar, informed.

A World Cup will be big in terms of handling the pressure situations, but winning a first Asia Cup with great team bonding can now see the youngsters take a leap of faith in their abilities in the tough African conditions that await them.



Bashundhara Kings captain Robson Da Silva holds aloft the trophy as his side celebrate clinching a record-equalling third Independence Cup title following a 2-1 win over Mohammedan SC in the final in Gopalganj yesterday. [Bottom] In a game where Kings conceded the goal first after being reduced to 10 men, forward Rakib Hossain's equaliser and Dorielton's winner sealed a thrilling victory for the reigning Bangladesh Premier League champions.

PHOTO: STAR

Comeback Kings retain Independence Cup

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings wrote another comeback story to retain their Independence Cup title with a dramatic 2-1 win over Mohammedan SC in the final at the Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni Stadium in Gopalganj yesterday.

The Kings had made a habit of staging come-from-behind victories in their recent AFC Cup campaign, where they won four matches on the trot after conceding first.

Yesterday, the charges of Oscar Bruzon displayed the same fighting spirit in the final, where they bounced back after getting reduced to 10 men and conceding the first goal to win their third Independence Cup title.

Kings' Brazilian trio of Dorielton Gomes, Miguel Ferreira and Robson Da Silva, who had played crucial roles in those victories in the AFC Cup, were the architects behind their victory in the final as Robson fed Rakib Hossain the equaliser and Miguel assisted Dorielton in scoring the winner.

Though the stakes were not as high as the AFC Cup, Kings faced a stern test against the self-proclaimed 'underdogs' Mohammedan SC.

Alfaz Ahmed's charges held their own in the first half and after Kings' winger Rafiqul Islam was handed his marching orders in the 48th minute, Mohammedan made full use of their one-man advantage and took the lead in the 50th minute, courtesy of a header from Nigeria's Emanuel Sunday.

But conceding the goal lit a fire under the bellies of the Kings, as it took them only two minutes to retaliate with a goal.

"Despite being reduced to 10 men, we played with the same approach of attacking football. We knew anything could happen in the final but we were optimistic of winning the match," said Rakib, who levelled the margin with a low left-footed drive inside the box.



Kings never looked like they were a man short as they kept pressing hard for the winner which came just two minutes later.

Kings' Brazilian captain Robson said that despite conceding first and being a player short, he believed his team would bounce back, like they had done many times before in recent months.

"When we conceded the goal, I knew it was going to be a difficult game. But our team has been very good and mentally strong.... When we levelled the game, I knew we were going to be champions," Robson said after the match.

After being reduced to 10 men, Bruzon made some tactical changes, keeping forwards Dorielton and Miguel upfront and deploying three centre backs to strengthen the defence.

Bruzon said that he had learnt from their 1-2 defeat at the hands of Mohammedan in last season's Federation Cup and made the necessary tactical changes.

"That was our mental

preparation ahead of the game because we knew playing against Mohammedan in Gopalganj will be a very tough game and we had that experience against them in last season's Federation Cup semifinal. So, we were much more prepared this time.

"We did not play our usual buildup game and didn't control the midfield much. We tried to win the second ball and capitalised the set-pieces. Mohammedan was also ready for us. I think the game could've gone either way and we are lucky to defend the title," Oscar said.

Pacers have a field day

SPORTS REPORTER

As many as 25 wickets fell in the two Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) matches yesterday, in which fast bowlers scalped the lion's share of wickets, as the second round of the country's first-class tournament got underway.

Utilising playing conditions to their advantage in Sylhet and Dhaka, the likes of Khaled Ahmed, Rejaur Rahman Raja, Shohidul Islam and other quicks tormented the batters to scalp 16 wickets.

At Sylhet International Cricket stadium, East Zone bundled out North Zone for a paltry 108 and went on to end the day on 122 for two, earning a first-innings lead of 14 runs, courtesy of opener Parvez Hossain Emon's 66 off 140 balls.

Asked to bat, North batters faced the music as the Sylheti pace duo of Khaled and Rejaur bagged four wickets apiece while another seamer Jayed removed opener Mahmudul Hasan Joy to kickstart North's misery.

Meanwhile, following the close of day's play at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Central Zone trail by 161 runs in their first innings after restricting South Zone to 214.

Having lost opener Pinak Ghosh for naught after being sent in to bat, South kept losing wickets at regular intervals and were reeling on 127 for seven.

However, a rearguard action from Moin Khan, who scored a team-high 75 off 110 balls, helped steer the defending champions past 200.

Shohidul took three wickets while fellow pacer Abu Hider and off-spinner Shuvagata Hom scalped two each.

In reply, Central slumped to 53 for three at stumps as fast bowler Sumon Khan removed both the openers – Naim Sheikh (8) and Abdul Mazid, while off-spinner Nayeem Hasan dismissed skipper Saif Hassan (14).

To lead the consolidation act today, Central will be relying on in-form Naeem Islam, unbeaten on 22.

Time for Tigers to be bold

MAZHAR UDDIN

Following a 44-run defeat (via DLS) in a rain-curtailed first ODI, Bangladesh will be eyeing to come up with a different approach and must look to form a well-balanced playing eleven in order to save the series when they take on New Zealand in the second ODI of the three-match series at Saxton Oval in Nelson on Wednesday.

The idea of having four specialist bowlers in the line-up to make room for an extra batter to strengthen the batting unit backfired badly for the Tigers in the first game as Soumya Sarkar, making a comeback to the side after being sidelined for the World Cup, was unable to live up to expectations as the fifth bowling option.

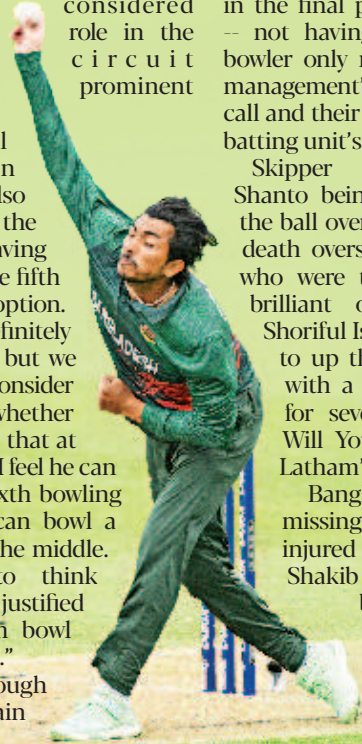
Soumya was backed by the selectors for his ability to chip in with a few overs with his medium pace but the 30-year-old all-rounder's bowling skills barely merit him a place as a reliable bowling option in an ODI.

Soumya, who bowled the full quota of six overs in a 30-overs

a-side contest in the first match, went on to concede 63 runs with the New Zealand batters not taking much time to realise and exploit the weakest link in the Bangladesh bowling unit.

"Is he for this domestic as well?" coach Nazmul Abedeen Fahim was also sceptical of the idea of having Soumya as the fifth bowling option. "Soumya definitely got the skills but we also need to consider the fact that whether he can utilise that at the moment. I feel he can still be the sixth bowling option and can bowl a few overs in the middle. We need to think whether it is justified to make him bowl the full quota."

Even though the final rain



interruption in the first ODI had forced Bangladesh to adjust their bowling plan – the Tigers had already had their lead pacers bowl most of their overs which forced them to rely on Soumya in the final phase of the game – not having a genuine fifth bowler only reflected the team management's poor judgment call and their lack of faith in the batting unit's capability.

Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto being forced to hand the ball over to Soumya in the death overs meant the hosts, who were two down after a brilliant opening over by Shoriful Islam, had a chance to up the ante and finish with a huge total of 239 for seven, courtesy of a Will Young ton and Tom Latham's 92.

Bangladesh are surely missing the services of injured regular skipper Shakib Al Hasan in both the batting and bowling departments and as it always happens in the

absence of the champion all-rounder, the Tigers' think tank is having to deal with a dilemma when it comes to forming a balanced eleven.

With the likes of uncapped leg spinner Rishad Hossain, left-arm spinner Rakibul Hasan, and pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib in the squad as bowling options, it will be important for coach Chandika Hathurusingha and the team management to shed their defensive approach and relay a positive mindset with the team selection for the upcoming game.

"It's important to put more emphasis on the outcome rather than relying on the names or experience. We did not have bowlers who could bowl fifty overs in the first ODI. For instance, if there is someone more capable than Shakib [for any game] then you must pick him. But we are yet to think that way," Fahim added, hinting that the Tigers are yet to show boldness in their thought process. Maybe it is time for a fresh approach from the Tigers, especially after the recent World Cup debacle.

Barca get tough Napoli draw

AGENCIES

Spanish heavyweights Barcelona will face Napoli while holders Manchester City will take on FC Copenhagen in the last 16 of the Champions League following Monday's draw in Nyon, Switzerland.

Copenhagen, who twice met City's rivals Manchester United in the group stage of the competition, will travel to Manchester yet again to face Pep Guardiola's side.

The Danish team will have their work cut out against the champions, who won all six of their group stage matches and are on an unbeaten run of 20 games in European football.

Pep Guardiola's City, who are looking to retain the title they won in Istanbul last June, will be expected to comfortably get the better of the Danish side, who qualified from their group at the expense of Manchester United after beating the Red Devils 4-3 at home.

One of either the Serie A or LaLiga champions Napoli and Barcelona will not proceed after being pitted against each other in Monday's draw.

Another high-voltage clash between Italian and Spanish sides will see last year's finalists Inter Milan take on three-time runners-up Atletico Madrid.

Inter, the Serie A leaders, were one of the teams to avoid after finishing second in their group and their meeting with Atletico will see Diego Simeone, the coach of the Spanish club, come up against a team with whom he spent two years as a player in the late 1990s.



French champions Paris Saint-Germain, who have gone out in the last 16 in each of the last two seasons and in five of the last seven campaigns, were also braced for a tough draw having come second in their group behind Borussia Dortmund.

They will therefore be relieved at being handed a tie against Real Sociedad, who topped their section above Inter but are appearing in the Champions League last 16 for the first time since 2003/04, when they were knocked out by Lyon.

Record 14-time winners Real Madrid will take on German side RB Leipzig, while English Premier League leaders Arsenal have a tricky assignment against Porto and Harry Kane-led Bayern Munich face Italy's Lazio.

The first legs will take place in mid-February with the return matches in March.

This season's Champions League final will be staged at Wembley in London on June 1.