

Carrying the same old headache into 2024

NABID YEASIN

"At the beginning of the series, we spoke about what we have done before and that we want to do better than that. So, in that sense, I think this is a very successful tour," Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusingha reflected on how it went for the Tigers in their final series of 2023.

Hathurusingha was spot on. Bangladesh did wrap the year up on a very sweet note -- registering maiden ODI and T20I wins and also recorded their best outcome in a T20 series, a 1-1 draw with one game washed out, against the Black Caps in New Zealand.

But one aspect of the Tigers still remains a big headache. An upbeat Bangladesh will carry good momentum into the next year, but with that, they will also take along the disappointment of not finding answers to their batting woes even in their best-ever year in the shortest format. Barring the three matches played in the Asian Games, the Tigers have won nine of the 11 T20Is played this year.

In fact, instability and fragility have been constant features of the Tigers' batting regardless of the format. The ODI World Cup debacle in India was also the by-product of a misfiring batting line-up, among many other issues.

From misjudging the nature of the surface, nonsensical shotmaking, and faulty approach all the way down to just not being aware of their own capabilities with the willow -- the list of worries regarding Bangladesh's batting seems to be endless. Hathurusingha, however, focused more on the former than anything else when he analysed the Tigers' 110 all out in 19.2 overs in a game they ended up losing by 17 runs [via DLS] in Mount Maunganui yesterday.

"We actually discussed after two overs that this is not going to be a 160-run wicket, but a 140 or 150-run wicket.



But, of course, we did not achieve that. We did not bat well. We were 84 for four in the 10th over, so you are not going to win many games doing that," Hathurusingha explained.

Initial misjudgement of the surface, however, barely justifies Soumya Sarkar getting trapped in front trying to play across the line in the very first over, Rony Talukdar lacking the skill required to fend off a delivery hurled at his pads at around 148kph, Afif Hossain making a fool of himself by going down the track against a spinner to only somehow inside edge one off his pads to the keeper or Shamim Hossain failing yet again to prove his worth at number six.

It seemed as if the players were instructed to have a go at the Kiwi bowlers, even when the pitch perhaps merited a different approach, without having a proper plan in mind.

The first game that the Tigers were able to chase down a mediocre total, despite a top-order wobble, was mostly due to an anchor role played at the top by Liton Das, who remained unbeaten for a team-high 42 in that game in Napier.

Like in this series, most of Bangladesh's wins this year were due to outstanding performances from the bowlers, especially the pacers who bailed the Tigers out even when backed into a corner.

Hathurusingha had jokingly asked the media during this series for suggestions as to "what could be done" regarding the batting that had left him clueless. Discounting the witticism, the Sri Lankan may as well start looking for answers if the Tigers hope for their 2023 T20 success materialise into a successful World Cup campaign in June 2024.



Superstar Cristiano Ronaldo, a perennial defier of odds and age, finished 2023 as the top goalscorer in the world for club and country, beating Harry Kane, Kylian Mbappe, and Erling Haaland, as the 38-year-old netted for the 54th time in Al-Nassr's 4-1 win over Al-Taawoun in the Saudi Pro League on Saturday. Mbappe and Kane have scored 52 goals each for club and country while Manchester City goal machine Haaland ended the year with 50 goals in total. This is the fifth time that Ronaldo ended the year as the top scorer, overtaking Lionel Messi to be the player who has done it the most times since the turn of the millennium.

A BETTER YEAR hinges on improved management

BISHWAJIT ROY

We all hope the year 2024 will be a better one for Bangladesh sports. Despite some brilliant wins, notable individual performances in the country's two major sports--cricket and football-- we had an average 2023, which also marked another year of seeing other sports gradually disappearing from the limelight.

At the onset of a new year full of fresh opportunities, all of us must look forward to the future but not with the same mindset of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan Papon.

The BCB boss had told the reporters on December 9 after the defeat against New Zealand in the Mirpur Test that 'those who are interested to stay in the past, let them do that... we will move forward.'

He said that as he was apparently no longer interested to speak about Bangladesh's World Cup debacle and the progress of the inquiry committee, which was formed by the board to find out the reasons behind the dismal show.

The Tigers' Test victory against New Zealand in Sylhet helped Papon find his voice after remaining



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

uncharacteristically silent following the World Cup.

The historic ODI and T20I wins in New Zealand in December will surely further bolster his confidence in the New Year.

History, however, tells us that sporadic successes hardly bring any long term and sustainable progress in our sports, whether it is cricket, football or some other discipline.

In Bangladesh, following every success or disaster in sports leaves

us puzzled about how to go about identifying the problems.

A dismal showing compels us to think that our players don't have the ability to go far. We even love to compare with other countries who have fewer facilities than us but are performing well in big events.

On the other hand, a brilliant performance bolsters our confidence, compels us to claim that we have the talent but a lack of proper management and long-term vision are impeding

our progress and are keeping us from consistently achieving better results.

In cricket, the most pathetic thing to happen last year was not the disastrous showing in the World Cup but the board's reluctance in finding out the reasons behind the debacle, actively trying to sweep it under the rug and move forward without examining the faults.

In football, there were some rays of hope but questions remain whether the few sporadic successes will bring any changes in the country's football without the existence of a professional football structure.

In other sports, there was hardly any hope. The outcome in the Asian Games once again showed that we have surrendered to the fact of being little more than mere spectators in global events as we hardly have any goals or have undertaken any long-term measures to make a mark.

In a gloomy year in Bangladesh cricket, the Nigar Sultana-led women's cricket team deserves its flowers for gifting the country with a number of historic victories. After an underwhelming 2023, can we hope for a better 2024 in sports? Yes, we can, but only if the necessary changes are made at the management level.

Shoriful emerges as leader of the pack

SPORTS REPORTER

Shoriful Islam's emergence as the leader of the Bangladesh pace attack in 2023 came at a very opportune time for the Tigers.

In the absence of Taskin Ahmed and Ebadot Hossain, who are both out injured, Bangladesh needed someone to step into their shoes which the left-arm seamer did splendidly well and, in the process, established himself as an all-format bowler.

The 22-year-old was the standout performer for the Tigers in New Zealand, claiming six wickets each in the three-match ODI series and the three-match T20 series, finishing as the highest wicket-taker in the tour in both formats.

His performance in the T20 series, which ended 1-1, also earned him his first player-of-the-series award in international cricket.

The lanky pacer from Panchagarh was also instrumental behind Bangladesh's maiden ODI and T20 wins in New Zealand against the hosts, picking up three wickets in both matches in Napier.

2023 was Shoriful's best year in international cricket thus far as he finished as the leading wicket-taker for Bangladesh in ODIs with 32 wickets in 19 matches and made it into the top 10 wicket-takers list in the 50-over format in the world.

Shoriful was also among the top three wicket-takers for Bangladesh in Tests and T20Is in 2023.

A year that ended in such a high note had begun in a solemn one for the pacer, as at the start of 2023 Shoriful was not part of the team in any format.

"He [Shoriful] has been outstanding for us in all the

three formats recently. Eight months ago, he was not in the team, not playing any format and now he is the leading bowler for us, so very impressive," said coach Chandika Hathurusingha to the media yesterday.

Shoriful's ability to take wickets with the new ball has been the hallmark of his bowling.

Even in the third and final T20I, which the visitors lost by 17 runs in DLS method defending a small total of 110 runs, the left-arm pacer picked up two early wickets and raised some hopes for the Tigers.

His ability to swing the ball back into the right-hander makes him a difficult bowler to contend with, something Kiwi opener Finn Allen will surely remember after losing his wicket to Shoriful in all six matches of the tour.

Shoriful also has seemingly increased his pace, can now surprise the batters with his bouncers and deceive them with his slower deliveries, which are testaments to the improvements he has made since making the jump to the senior level after winning the Under-19 World Cup in 2020.

"There were no experienced bowlers during my U-19 days because we were all the same age," Shoriful had told The Daily Star last year in an interview.

"But now I am getting a lot of support and guidance from seniors like Taskin (Ahmed) and Fizz (Mustafizur Rahman). They constantly share their experience in the dressing room and it actually helps me a lot."

In just one year's time, Shoriful has broken out of the shadows of his once idols and in the new year, his challenge will be to continue on this upward journey and scale newer heights.



Nadal loses comeback doubles match

REUTERS, BRISBANE

Rafael Nadal returned to action for the first time since January at the Brisbane International on Sunday, losing his doubles match but overall showing no obvious after-effects of the hip injury that ruined his year.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion, who is gearing up for the Jan. 14-28 Australian Open, sustained the hip problem in his second round loss at Melbourne Park at the start of 2023 and ended his season early after having surgery in June.

Nadal rekindled his partnership with retired veteran Marc Lopez, with whom he won an Olympic gold medal in 2016, for his comeback but the duo lost 6-4, 6-4 to Australians Max Purcell and Jordan Thompson at a packed Pat Rafter Arena.

The 37-year-old was warmly welcomed by fans who held up Spanish flags and supportive messages while the loudest cheers were reserved for his trademark whipped shots and a powerful crosscourt backhand winner in the opening set.

Nadal is likely to get a similar reception in his singles opener on Tuesday against qualifier Dominic Thiem, whom he defeated in the 2018 and 2019 French Open finals and holds a 9-6 win-loss record against.

BFF eyes more friendly matches for women

SPORTS REPORTER

Mahfuza Akter Kiran, chairman of Bangladesh Football Federation's women's committee, today said that the game's local governing body will arrange FIFA friendly matches for the women's team on all the FIFA windows.

In 2023, Bangladesh team played four friendlies -- two each against Nepal and Singapore -- and played three competitive matches in Asian Games. Out of the seven games, the women in red and green won two matches against Singapore in December and drew three times against Nepal while losing against Japan and Vietnam.

"All is well that ends in well," Kiran termed the year 2023, hoping the coming year would be a good one for women's football in Bangladesh.

"We have many engagements in 2024 with SAFF U-19 Women's Championship and AFC U-17 Women's Championship Qualifiers to be held in February and March while the senior SAFF Women's Championship will take place in September-October in Bangladesh," said Kiran. "We have all preparation for these championships."

"We will also avail all FIFA windows to play against good opponents. Our target is to win all matches in a bid to lift the ranking of women's team in Asia," she said, adding that Saiful Bari Titu will act as the head coach of different age-group teams.

Warner set for Sydney farewell

REUTERS

David Warner has been given the hometown farewell from Test cricket he craved after the opening batsman was named in an unchanged Australia line-up for the third and final Test against Pakistan in Sydney next week.

Warner said in June he wanted to call time on his 12-year Test career at the Sydney Cricket Ground and, with the Australians holding an unassailable 2-0 lead in the series, the 37-year-old has been granted his wish.

"The National Selection Panel have retained the same squad from Melbourne to Sydney as we look to clean sweep the Test series," chief selector George Bailey said.

"We look forward to celebrating David Warner's final test match and his incredible career at his home ground."

Sydney's Warner went into the current series with question marks over his form due to a lack of test runs, but a rapidfire 164 in the first innings of the opening test in Perth erased any doubts over his position in the team.

