

Kohli, Rohit return for Afghan T20Is

ICC

Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma have made a comeback to India's T20I setup for the first time since the end of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2022, in what is a major development for the side ahead of the T20 World Cup 2024.

Rohit will lead the side, while Jitesh Sharma and Sanju Samson will be the two wicket-keepers as the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced a 16-member squad yesterday.

The Indian squad include a number of all-round options including Shivam Dube, Washington Sundar, and Axar Patel. Ravi Bishnoi and Kuldeep Yadav will be the leg-spinners, while Avesh Khan, Arshdeep Singh, and Mukesh Kumar will be handling the pace department.

The other batters in the side are Shubman Gill, Rinku Singh, Yashasvi



Jaiswal, and Tilak Varma.

Earlier, the Afghanistan Cricket Board also announced a 19-member squad for the series, with a number of their stars returning to the fold.

Rashid Khan made a comeback to the Afghanistan side for the first time since the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup 2023.

However, there are doubts over his availability for the three-game series given that he's recovering from back surgery.

In his absence, Ibrahim Zadran has been named as the stand-in skipper. The opener recently led the Asian side to a 2-1 win over the

UAE. Ikram Alikhil returns to the squad after having been among the reserves in the UAE series.

Mujeeb Ur Rahman also returns after missing the T20I series in UAE.

The three-match T20I series starts on January 11, 2024.

ANISUR RAHMAN

Sakline Mostafa Sajid, a 13-year-old chess prodigy, has made a big splash in Bangladesh's chess fraternity by clinching back-to-back titles in just one week's time, outsmarting several FIDE Masters and Grand Masters of the country.

Candidate Master Sakline first became the unbeaten champion in the open section of Sheikh Russel National Under-20 Chess Championship on December 31, 2023, which featured promising FMs Tahsin Tajwar Zia and Manon Reza Neer.

Then on January 6, the teenager reigned supreme over veterans GM Ziaur Rahman and GM Reefat Bin Sattar and also FMs like Sheikh Nasir, Mehdi Hasan, Tahsin Tajwar, Reza Neer and Subrato Biswas to lift the title of Walton International Rating Chess tournament.

Sakline, who is an eighth grader from Rajarbagh Police Line School, said that he surprised himself by winning the top prize in the International Rating Chess tournament.

"At the Walton tournament, my target was to finish in the top five. I never thought of becoming the champion," said Sakline.

"I was demoralised after losing to Tahsin bhai. But I was still confident and remained focused on my games. In the last round, Neer lost to Zia bhai and I beat FM Sheikh Nasir bhai



to become the champion," he added.

Sakline learnt the basics of the game from his businessman father in Pabna and was introduced to the many advanced strategies of chess from his elder brother Julkarnine Naim.

"To be honest, he is a very hard-working and talented player. He regularly watches matches between Super GMs and plays online chess to hone his skills," said Julkarnine, a banker by profession.

In 2019, the young boy from Pabna finished fourth in the School Chess Championship, organised by Shishu-Academy, and then became the national champion in the Under-8 category. He also participated in two tournaments in

Sri Lanka and India, where his family bore the expenses.

In 2021, Sakline became a member of the Bangladesh Police Chess Club and began living in a rented apartment in Dhaka with his elder brother and sister.

He earned CM title after becoming runner-up in Western Asian Youth Championship in the Maldives in 2022.

Sakline now dreams of becoming a GM and win laurels for Bangladesh in the international stage.

"My ultimate goal is to earn the GM title which is very tough. I don't know how I will achieve it but I want to achieve it and I am confident that I can do it," said the teenager.

Bangladesh has a poor track record of handling the development of chess prodigies, as many promising young talents have withered away after a bright start.

To go to the next level, Sakline needs to compete in tournaments abroad, which is very difficult to do without the support of a sponsor or the federation.

His elder brother hopes that sponsors will come forward to help his sibling fulfill his dreams. "Our family will financially support Sakline as long as possible. But I think the sponsors need to come forward to support him to achieve his goals," said Julkarnine.

'I enjoy playing overseas more'

Probably one of the most underrated cricketers in the current Bangladesh squad, **Sheikh Mahedi Hasan** has shown glimpses of talent whenever he was called upon. The 29-year-old allrounder, who played a pivotal role in the Tigers' maiden T20I win over the Kiwis on New Zealand soil recently, spoke to **Mazhar Uddin of The Daily Star**, where he shared his thoughts about his role and plans among a few other topics. The excerpts of the interview are given below:

The Daily Star (DS): You made a comeback to the T20I side after over one year through the recent New Zealand series. How do you assess your performance?

Sheikh Mahedi Hasan (SMH): Obviously, it feels good when you perform. But yes, players of my type need to perform regularly, or else we might be dropped due to the team combination. So for me, every match is challenging as I need to perform whenever I get the opportunity.

DS: What do you mean by 'my type of player'?

SMH: There is huge competition in the team. Like me and [Mehedi Hasan] Miraz are both similar types of players but he has improved himself a lot and his range of skills is high. So, from that point of view, I get fewer opportunities and it is a challenge for me to develop into a better cricketer all the time.

DS: Do you expect more consistent opportunities to prove yourself?

SMH: When you get to play more matches consistently, you tend to learn from your mistakes and apply that to get better. As a player, there will be ups and downs but when the team backs you, it helps you to freely express yourself. Getting a nod also depends on the team combination and since Miraz and I have similar sort of skills, and the fact that he has been playing brilliantly in the last few years, the

team management had to choose the one who is performing. It is also obvious since you can't accommodate two similar sorts of players in the eleven.

DS: How do you define your role in the team?

SMH: I am not bothered about my role all the time. Suppose, I didn't get to bowl till the 49th over of a game, I will still be prepared to give my best if I get the opportunity to bowl in the 50th over.

DS: Do you feel your performance in the domestic circuit help you cope in the national team?

SMH: Definitely, we all learn by playing. I try to visualise my performances and how I handle situations in the domestic circuits whenever I play international cricket. But there is a huge difference in domestic and international cricket so I try to work and improve my skill set all the time and reflect on my game during breaks.

DS: Did you have a chat with head coach Chandika Hathurusingha about your game?

SMH: Well yeah, he spoke with me about how I can improve my batting which will help me and the team. Even I also realise that I should improve my batting and work on it.

DS: Do you feel you could have done better with the bat given your potential?

SMH: I totally agree. But the thing is



international cricket is very tough and for me, it is even tougher since I do not get enough opportunities to bat in order to test myself at the top level consistently. Maybe I need more time to explore my batting skills and, in this aspect, I feel I lag behind and if I could improve, I might be able to get more opportunities.

DS: Which position do you like to bat at in T20s?

SMH: I am ready to bat at any position as per the demands of the team. But if I get an opportunity to bat at number seven or eight, I would like to finish and win the game.

Maybe I won't be able to do it all the time but my approach and attitude will remain the same. I am trying to work on that as all the quality bowlers in world cricket generally bowl during the death overs. So, it is difficult to score at that position.

DS: Do you think it is challenging to perform away from home?

SMH: Interestingly, I enjoy playing overseas more as I like to take the challenge since the wicket and conditions are different from what we normally play at home. There you have quality batters and the pitches are not spin-friendly. I always feel that I have the courage to accept the challenges as a bowler. I might not have great skills in my bowling but I try to adjust fearlessly in those situations.

DS: Keeping the upcoming T20 World Cup in mind later this year, how do you want to prepare yourself?

SMH: Since we have the Bangladesh Premier League starting this month, I would want to utilise this as a platform to work on my skill and perform both with bat and ball. As a player, it is not guaranteed that you will remain in the same shape and consistency after six months so it is a continuous process. But I would like to give my best in the upcoming BPL.

Nadal pulls out of Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne



Rafael Nadal on Sunday pulled out of the Australian Open with a "micro tear on a muscle" barely a week after making his comeback from a year-long injury absence, but said he remained positive.

The 37-year-old had been out of the game since injuring his hip at the 2023 Australian Open, undergoing surgery before making his return at the

Brisbane International.

He won his opening two matches in straight sets and looked in good touch, but needed a medical timeout towards the end of his quarter-final loss to Australia's Jordan Thompson after feeling pain in his upper left thigh.

"During my last match in Brisbane I had a small problem on a muscle that as you know made me worried," he said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Once I got to Melbourne I have had the chance to make an MRI and I have micro tear on a muscle, not in the same part where I had the injury and that's good news.

"Right now I am not ready to compete at the maximum level of five-set matches. I'm flying back to Spain to see my doctor, get treatment and rest." His absence from the Australian Open could mean he has played at Melbourne Park for the last time, having said there was a "high percentage" that 2024 would be his farewell to the tour.

He said in Brisbane that his health would be the deciding factor in any decision about continuing to play after this season.

"We will miss you in Melbourne, Rafa," the Australian Open said on its official X feed. "Sending all our love and best wishes for a speedy recovery. See you on the court soon."

Real, Atletico advance to Spanish Cup last 16

REUTERS, Aranda De Duero

Real Madrid cruised into the last 16 of the Copa del Rey with a 3-1 win over Arandina on Saturday, while Atletico Madrid progressed after a 3-1 win away to third-tier Lugo courtesy of a second-half double from Memphis Depay and Angel Correa's early goal.

Real opened the scoring in the 54th minute through Joselu from the penalty spot after a foul on Brahim Diaz, who extended the visitors' lead a minute later.

Carlo Ancelotti's side have struggled with injuries but put in some solid performances, including the debut of Arda Guller, who played for the first time after recovering from several injuries following his summer signing.

A stoppage-time strike from Brazilian forward Rodrygo sealed the win for Real, before Arandina pulled one back through an own goal by Nacho.

Atletico seemed to be in for a smooth game as well, taking the lead away at Lugo after two minutes when Angel Correa easily slotted home from Javi Galan's left-wing pass.

Lugo then mounted a resilient display as Leandro Antonetti seized on their opponents' sloppy defending to equalise in the 39th minute.

Dutch international Depay, however, restored Atletico's lead in the 66th minute from Koke's through ball before sealing the win with his second of the night just eight minutes later.

The round of 16 matches will be played on Jan. 17.



Players ramped up preparation for the Australian Open in great fashion in various competitions. Elena Rybakina demolished Aryna Sabalenka in 6-0, 6-3 sets in the Brisbane International final yesterday to win her sixth WTA title a week before the first Grand Slam of the year. Andrey Rublev swept past Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori 6-4, 6-4 to win the Hong Kong Open. Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov claimed his first title since 2017 with a 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 win over Holger Rune of Denmark in Brisbane. Coco Gauff held her nerve to beat Elina Svitolina in 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-3 sets in a gruelling three-set final to retain her Auckland Classic

PHOTO: AFP

