

Wickets that allow strokeplay in demand

SPORTS REPORTER

With the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) fast approaching, slated to begin on January 19, focus turns to how much entertainment the tournament can provide this time around.

The focus will turn sharply to the wickets in question that will be used in this BPL: not only because better wickets equate to a more entertaining tournament but also because the national team has a T20 World Cup coming up in June and part of the preparation and selection process would start from the upcoming BPL.

High frequency of games resulted in tired wickets in BPL in the past, keeping crowd away from the franchise T20 league. The pattern was reversed last time around as quality wickets produced runs, aiding the national team in the process as batters such as Najmul Hossain Shanto, Towhid Hridoy and Rony Talukdar — top three run-getters in the last edition — produced impactful innings to showcase their talent, the latter two getting into the national team on the back of BPL performances.

Shanto, the stand-in skipper in all three formats at the moment, had said during the recent home Tests against New Zealand that they needed better wickets for white-ball matches. The idea had propagated from Bangladesh's dismal outing in the ODI World Cup last year when batters could not take advantage as per their potential.

Yesterday, BCB Grounds Committee chairman Mahbub Anam, along with the three national selectors and Mirpur ground's curator Gamini de Silva, observed the wickets. The demands from the wickets remain the same this time



Bangladesh batting stalwart Mahmudullah Riyad, who will represent Fortune Barishal in the upcoming Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), walks back to the dressing room after spending time at the nets at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

ICC U-19 WC Sohel to stand in opening game

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladeshi umpire Gazi Sohel is set to officiate as an on-field umpire in the opening match of the ICC Under-19 World Cup in South Africa on January 19, a day before the Bangladesh team kick off their campaign from Group A.

Featuring Sohel and his compatriot Masudur Rahman Mukul, the International Cricket Council (ICC) yesterday announced the names of 16 umpires and four match referees for the 24 group-stage fixtures of the main event.

The ICC press release further stated that the officials for the Super Six phase, semifinals and final will be declared later.

On the opening day, hosts South Africa will face the West Indies in Potchefstroom in a Group B fixture, with Sohel serving as on-field umpire alongside Ireland's Roland Black.

Sohel will get to officiate all six Group B matches, serving as an on-field umpire in three of them. Mukul, likewise, will stand as an on-field umpire for three Group C matches. The duo will officiate in four warm-up matches.



too and better wickets can make selectors' task easier going forward.

"We always want wickets that produce runs like T20 matches should so that batters play their strokes. That's all we want this time too. The wickets are getting a bit of time in terms of preparation and we are hoping that we will get that kind of wickets. Since the ground got some rest this time around, we are hoping for good cricket," selector Habibul Bashar said.

In the last BPL, the fourth phase in Sylhet produced 2,580 runs across eight matches with an innings average of over 161 runs. The first phase in Mirpur averaged at 152 runs per innings in eight matches but in the third phase (four games) and the fifth phase (10 games) at the venue, the innings average fell to 138 and 142 respectively. It did climb in the eliminators, qualifier and final match, though, where innings average rose to over 162 in four matches.

"The problem this season is that games end at 10pm and next day there is a game again in the afternoon and the wicket doesn't get enough time to dry up from dew," Bashar said about the reason for not getting run-fests in certain games.

The main focus would be on getting batters into the flow for the T20 World Cup to be played in the USA and the West Indies. Bashar could not give a fair idea about what to expect from pitches in New York or Dallas or Saint Vincent — where Bangladesh would play the four group-stage matches, but he expected the wickets in the ICC tournament to be more sporting compared to what are prepared for bilateral series.

With better wickets, batters would be able to get more from their shots and may get themselves into the sort of adventurous mindset needed to take Bangladesh's T20 cricket to the next level. Suffice to say, it aids bowlers who need better preparation for flat wickets as was evidenced in India recently.

Lack of franchise culture robbing BPL of its identity

SPORTS REPORTER

As the tenth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) begins on January 19, the challenge of forging its own identity persists nearly 11 years since the tournament's inception.

A frequent change of team owners, and their names as a result, has fans and players alike discussing whether to refer to the individual franchises that represent a given region as their home team.

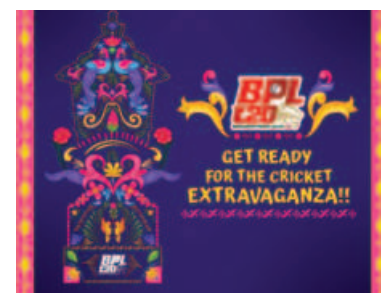
For example, Bangladesh captain Shakib Al Hasan, who hails from Magura district in Khulna division, will play for Rangpur Riders, whereas Chattogram-born Tamim Iqbal will represent Fortune Barishal in the upcoming instalment of the country's lone franchise-based T20 tournament.

When it comes to the Indian Premier League (IPL), every cricket fan is aware of which core group of players are referred to when the names of Kolkata Knight Riders or Chennai Super Kings are mentioned. Likewise, the fanbases for those franchises are formidable.

However, such ties from fans and cricketers to their particular franchises have yet to be realised in the BPL owing to the continual change of club owners. It thus hampers the true goal of franchise cricket around the world, which is to develop brand value and loyalty to their region.

With less than two weeks until

the start of the upcoming BPL, it is likely that even the players of the respective teams, let alone the supporters, are unaware of who their teammates are since the franchises have not done much to promote their region to create the vibe.



Star-studded Barishal began optional training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur a few days ago. With Tamim, Mushfiqur Rahim, and Mahmudullah Riyad in their ranks, the franchisee could have used their star power to attract regional fans through promotional activities.

The lack of bonding among the team's players has also been evident, with Barishal head coach Mizanur Rahman Babul admitting it. He hopes that the cricketers will be able to adapt once the tournament gets underway.

"I think the culture of building team bonding is yet to happen in BPL for various reasons. Since the BPL is starting from January

19, some of the foreign players are expected to arrive just before the opening game," Babul told the media yesterday.

"From this point obviously, we won't be able to have a great bonding to be honest. But since there's a lot of competitive tournaments going on around the world, I think it doesn't take much time for the professional players to have that bonding and show their skills. It's an easy thing for the players and they know how to accommodate."

Comilla Victorians, in this context, remain a notable exception. They had been able to retain some consistency in terms of building a stable fan following over the years by running a few promotional events, gaining players' loyalty in the process.

Prior to the commencement of this BPL, Sylhet Strikers organised a bowler hunt campaign in Sylhet and other areas, following which 13 aspiring cricketers were selected from a trial of approximately 900 cricketers. The fortunate individuals will have the opportunity to bowl at national team cricketers and international stars at the nets before and during the competition.

It is high time that the BPL governing council, in collaboration with the team owners, put a greater effort than before to leverage brand value, so that loyalty and bonding can be fostered among cricketers and fans.

Smith to 'crack at something different'

AGENCIES

Steve Smith will take over from David Warner and open the batting alongside Usman Khawaja for Australia's Test team, selector George Bailey said on Wednesday ahead of a two-match series against West Indies later this month.

The decision to install Smith as Australia's next opener has been made with an eye to potentially extending the former skipper's already fabled Test career and is not simply a stop-gap measure to reshuffle the middle-order, selection chair George Bailey informed.

And the value-adding benefit of that move is the genuine enthusiasm Smith has espoused in taking on the new challenge, given he has repeatedly indicated he remains a series-by-series proposition when quizzed about his future in the five-day format.

"For all intents and purposes, this is where Steve wants to stay," Bailey said.

"One of the things I'm really excited about the change is that I think he's really motivated and energised and excited about the opportunity, and fingers crossed that can provide some longevity in the format.

"For someone who has achieved as much as he has over such a long period of time across all formats, it's a challenge or an itch he'd like to scratch and ultimately for us, as a team, it's something that fits.

He continued, "It's selfless that someone who's had such success in one position or a couple of positions in the middle order, that he's willing and hungry to have a crack at something different."



Young shooters walk same road as predecessors

SPORTS REPORTER

Country's shooters will once again return from the Asia Olympic Qualifications empty handed after Robiul Islam wasted a near-final qualification opportunity in the 10m air rifle event of the Asian Championships in Jakarta yesterday.

Robiul missed out on the eight-shooter final round by 0.3 points after scoring 628 points in the qualification round. Fathur Gustafian of Indonesia, who qualified as the eighth shooter and earned an Olympic quota place, scored 628.3 points in qualification round.

"We were confident that Robiul would play the final and win a medal, especially due to the way he was performing in training," assistant coach Golam Shafiquddin Khan Shiplu told over phone from Jakarta.

"Had Robiul qualified, he would have had a chance to win a medal too as he usually plays the final better than qualification," Shiplu said. "Besides, out of the eight shooters in the final, five had already earned Olympic quota places previously and the shooter from Indonesia secured the quota despite finishing fourth in the final round."

Experienced Arnab Sharar also disappointed by scoring less than his



Asian Games score as he finished 32nd with a score of 623.3 points while young Jidan Hossain finished 21st out of 55 competitors with a score of 625.4 points.

In women's 10m air rifle event, Shaira Arefin, Jafirah Chowdhury and Kamrunnhaar Koly finished 18th, 27th and 34th respectively among 62

participants. Failing to replicate training performances in international competitions has long been an issue for our shooters and the trend seems to continue.

"There may be two reasons behind this issue. The first is a lack of participation

in international competitions and the second one maybe inability to handle pressure," opined Commonwealth Games gold medalist Asif Hossain Khan.

"If shooters play less competitions, they would lack match temperament. Besides, the shooters compete among themselves in familiar environment, so when they compete against foreign shooters at international events, they can't handle the pressure," said the shooter-turned-coach.

Asif also said that a shooter may make good scores once or twice during practice, but that should not be given too much importance. What matters more is the average score.

"I think consistency is key to getting success and shooters should be given set targets to improve scores," said Asif.

Mustaque Wais, a member of Bangladesh Shooting Sport Federation and camp commandant, believes the lack of match temperament and lack of passion play key roles behind poor performances at international level.

Assistant coach Shiplu suggested increasing the number of shooters and tournaments to make domestic events more competitive so that the national shooters are pushed by each other for better performance.

SHORT CORNER

Lamichhane sentenced to eight years for rape

A court in Nepal on Wednesday sentenced former star cricket captain Sandeep Lamichhane to eight years in prison for rape. Lamichhane, 23, was once the poster boy for cricket in Nepal and the leg spinner's onfield success had boosted the sport's profile in the Himalayan republic. Lamichhane, who is not in custody, was not in court for the sentencing. His lawyer, Saroj Ghimire, told AFP he "will appeal the decision" in a higher court.

Kohli to miss opener, Rashid entire series

Star India batsman Virat Kohli will miss the first T20I of three-match series against Afghanistan today due to "personal reasons", coach Rahul Dravid said Wednesday. Meanwhile, Afghanistan spinner Rashid Khan will miss the entire due to injury, skipper Ibrahim Zadran informed. The leg spinner underwent lower-back surgery in November but remains part of the travelling squad.

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