

Ali's injury and 'team balance' pave Jaker's way

SPORTS REPORTER

It eventually took someone falling to an injury to make way for Jaker Ali Anik in Bangladesh's T20I squad ahead of their three-match series against Sri Lanka, starting on Monday in Sylhet.

The keeper-batter was roped in as a replacement for mystery spinner Aliss Al Islam, also his teammate in Comilla Victorians in the just-concluded Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), who was ruled out on Saturday due to a finger injury.

Jaker impressed in this BPL by batting with authority down the order for runners up Comilla, en route to amassing 199 runs at a stellar average of 99.5 and a commendable strike rate of 141.

The decision to include Jaker -- who has played three T20Is for the Tigers so far, following his debut in last year's Hangzhou Asian Games -- in place of a frontline spinner was the first call of action that the chief selector Gazi Ashraf Lipu had to respond to. He explained

that the inclusion would provide a better balance as the squad already possess three frontline spinners.

"In addition to Aliss, we have three other frontline spinners in Rishad (Hossain), Tajjul (Islam), and Sheikh Mahedi (Hasan) in the T20I squad," Lipu said.

"We believe, instead of adding another spinner to replace Aliss, the team's balance would be better served by including someone like Jaker Ali, who can bolster the middle or lower-middle order and serve as a finisher," he added.

During nearly six weeks of BPL action, Jaker looked fairly comfortable in understanding his role in Comilla Victorians' lineup. His role as a finisher demanded him to get off the blocks quickly and make an instant impact with hefty blows at the death.

With four-time champions Comilla's lineup in the recently concluded edition, batting up the order was always going to be a difficult proposition for the 26-year-old. With that reality in mind, he

said -- in an interview with The Daily Star, published on February 18 -- that he had to work differently to bat according to the demands of the team, deeming himself as a "coach-oriented" player.

Earlier, after Jaker wasn't named in the initial squad for the Sri Lanka series, Comilla head coach Mohammad Salahuddin had criticised the selection process -- the parting move made by the Minhajul Abedin Nannu-led selection panel.

"You are looking for players to bat at number six and seven, and this guy [Jaker] has been doing well for the last two years. He scores runs at crucial moments for us and is sensible. I feel that this boy should be given the opportunity," the Comilla coach had said, at a press conference on February 14.

Given the ever-present outcry for a finisher who could fulfil the demands of batting at six or seven for the Tigers in limited overs cricket, the inclusion appears to be justified; taking into account the proactive nature of Jaker's rearguard batting prowess and especially because the squad includes as many as five openers.



Bangladesh's all-format skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto underwent intensive training with coach Chadika Hathurusingha in Sylhet yesterday ahead of the three Sri Lanka T20Is, starting tomorrow. Shanto continued his trend of blowing hot and cold, with his latest rut, averaging a lowly 14.58 in 12 matches, in the recently concluded Bangladesh Premier League.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR



SHORT CORNER



PHOTO: BFF

Bangladesh national football team players pose for a photograph at the airport yesterday prior to their departure for Saudi Arabia, where they will undergo a two-week training camp before facing Palestine in home-and-away matches of the World Cup Qualifiers.

FIFA completely opposed to 'blue cards': Infantino

FIFA is against the International Football Association Board's proposal for so-called 'blue cards', President Gianni Infantino said, adding that he was unaware of the idea before it caught the public eye.

Brazil, Argentina announce squads for friendlies

With the Copa America in mind, Brazil coach Dorival Junior named a 26-man squad for their upcoming friendlies against England and Spain while Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni also announced a 26-man squad for their friendlies against Costa Rica and El Salvador, to be played in the United States.

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The fallacy of local dominance in BPL

ASHEFAQ-UL-ALAM

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics," is a famous quote from American author and humourist Mark Twain that alludes to the concealing nature of statistics.

Twain argued, that despite being based on concrete numbers, statistics often doesn't portray the full picture and leaves out more than it reveals.

This assessment of his holds true when looking at the run-getters statistics of the recently concluded 10th Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), where the local players have topped the charts in an apparent proof of their improved pedigree in the shortest format. Upon further inspection, however, this belief simply falls apart.

This BPL season, the top five run-getters were all local players, with champions Fortune Barishal's captain Tamim Iqbal at the lead with 492 runs, followed by Towhid Hridoy (462), Liton Das (391), Tanzid Hasan (384) and Mushfiqur Rahim (380).

In the bowler's list, the top three wicket-takers are all from Bangladesh as well -- Shoriful Islam (22), Shakib Al Hasan (17) and Mahedi Hasan (16) -- ahead of Mohammad Saifuddin and Chattogram Challengers' Oman pacer Bilal Khan, both tied at 15 wickets each.

Interestingly, the makeup of the top five run-scorers and wicket-takers was the same in the last season as well, with no foreign player in the batters' list and only one overseas recruit in the bowlers' one.

In the four seasons before that, local bowlers usually took up most of the spots in the top five wicket-takers' list, which didn't come as a surprise, considering how adept the local spinners are at bowling on the typical low and slow Bangladeshi tracks. But in the batters list, the foreigners always dominated, with an overseas batter finishing as the highest run-getter in all four of those editions -- Will Jacks (2022), Rilee Rossouw (2020, 2019) and Chris Gayle (2017).



The trend of overseas batters' dominance ended last season -- the same year when two other money-spinning leagues began taking place roughly in the same window as the BPL.

South Africa's SA20 and the UAE's IIT20 held their inaugural editions last year and most top T20 specialists of the world snubbed the BPL to turn up in the new leagues. Top international players flying in for a handful of games is nothing new in BPL. But since last season, this tendency has gone into overdrive.

Players like Rangpur Rider's Pakistan's Babar Azam and New Zealand's Jimmy Neesham played only six and seven matches, respectively, this season but left their mark in the short period, having scored 251 and 291 runs, respectively. In addition, Barishal's Kyle Mayers made 243 runs in six games.

All three of them could've potentially been in the running to become the highest run-getter had they played the entire tournament. The fallacy of local batters' dominance becomes even more apparent when looking at averages' list.

Among batters who have scored at least 200 runs, Neesham has the highest average among all, 72.75, followed by Benny Howell (57.25), Babar (50.2), Tom Bruce (46.33) and Mayers (40.5).

Comilla Victorians local batter Jaker Ali narrowly missed out on this list as although he averages 99.5, he has scored 199 runs in his 10 innings.

In terms of strike rate among batters with a minimum of 100 runs, Andre Russell (205.66) leads the list followed by Neesham (167.24), Jacks (165.26), Evin Lewis (162.99) and Avishka Fernando (159.63), which indicates that teams are mostly depending on foreign players for quick runs.

The dominance of Bangladeshi batters is likely to continue in upcoming seasons as BPL will continue to clash with the other two leagues, further inflating a false sense of progress which will most likely get deflated in the international arena.

United out to dent City's title charge

AGENCIES

Manchester United have the opportunity to knock Manchester City off their perch when they travel to the Etihad Stadium on Sunday even if they will not be the main beneficiaries of a surprise Premier League win.

* Erling Haaland, with five goals, netted the most number of his Premier League goals against Manchester United. Only Sergio Agüero (eight) has ever netted more against Man Utd for Man City.

* Manchester City have won four of their past five Premier League meetings with Manchester United, with two of those coming at home in the past two seasons.

United are a long way from a gripping three-way title race also featuring leaders Liverpool and Arsenal as 15 points separate the city rivals but sixth-placed United would take immense satisfaction at denting City's hopes of winning a record fourth successive Premier League crown.

City are unbeaten in their last 18 games in all competitions and warmed up for the derby with a 6-2 FA Cup win at Luton Town in which Erling Haaland scored five times. United also reached the quarter-finals of the FA Cup in midweek and were in a decent run of league form themselves until a 2-1 home defeat by Fulham last weekend.

"We are also on a good run, the spirit is very good," manager Erik Ten Hag said on Thursday. With City having won five of the past six Manchester derbies in all competitions but City manager Pep Guardiola insisted United have been as good as any Premier League team since January.

"They have the biggest quality," Guardiola said. "In 2024 they lost just one game, the consistency is there."

Mariners 'exploited unfit Abahani's mistakes'

SPORTS REPORTER

Dhaka Mariner Youngs Club retained the Club Cup hockey tournament title, beating Abahani 2-0 in the final at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

It was a second consecutive title in the season's curtain-raising tournament for the Arambagh-based outfit, who had defeated the same opposition 3-0 in the final of the last edition held in 2021.

Mariners dominated the game from get-go and took the lead through a reverse-hit from their Indian recruit Deepak Kumar in the fifth minute of the second quarter.

Abahani, however, created a few close chances and earned two penalty corners but Mariners goal-keeper Abu Sayeed Nippon was exceptional between the sticks, denying Indian forward Sumil Kumar from point-blank range in the first quarter.

There were some heated moments as the game was stopped for around 15 minutes in the second quarter after Abahani were awarded a penalty corner, which



the Mariners players denied to accept.

Following repeated attempts from the tournament committee officials, the Mariner players eventually agreed to return to the field.

Fazle Hossain Rabbi, who was later adjudged player of the final, extended Mariners' lead in the last

minute of the third quarter from a penalty stroke and Abahani were never able to stage a fightback.

Mariners were in emphatic throughout the tournament as they had stormed into the final with a massive 8-4 win over Usha KC on the back of three convincing wins in the previous matches and they capped the tournament off with a

convincing victory.

Mariners coach Mamunur Rashid attributed the lack of fitness of Abahani players as well as some tactical errors from the opposition team as the reason for their victory.

"I think they (Abahani) had fitness issues. At one point, they just stood in the middle. I think our main strength was the unity as we give importance to every single player. They also made a few mistakes regarding their playing positions as their midfield was wide open and we exploited those mistakes. I think the turning point of the game was the second goal," Mamunur told The Daily Star after the match.

The senior coach said that they were successfully able to mark the player of the tournament, Abahani's Ashraf Islam, who scored three goals in the tournament, with a different strategy.

"We managed to block Ashraful successfully as we had three players coming together during the penalty corners and we created a wall in front of him and didn't give him any opportunity to score," he added.

Titu 'okay' with 2-0 victory

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh coach Saiful Bari Titu said the performance in the 2-0 victory over Nepal in the opening match of the SAFF U-16 Women's Championship in Kathmandu yesterday was "okay", adding that he expected more goals from the players.

The Girls in Red and Green raced to a 2-0 lead within the first half-hour, thanks to a brace from star striker Sauravi Akanda Pritly, but failed to increase the margin of victory.

"For a first match, I think the performance was okay but a lot of improvements to be done," Titu told a press conference after the match.

"Especially with the chances that we created, we should have scored more goals. In the second half, we were supposed to dominate or have control of the match, but we didn't do it," the veteran coach added.

Bangladesh started the match aggressively and created two great opportunities early, but forward Alpi Akter, who was terrorising the Nepal defence all through, could not find the

target from scoring positions.

Pritly eventually broke the deadlock in the 24th minute with a placing shot following a through-ball from Sathi Munda before doubling the lead seven minutes later with a perfect spot-kick.

Bangladesh missed more chances in the rest of the match, including one by Pritly, who was later stretched off in the second half following an injury.

Titu felt the team took the foot off the gas in the second half and that high-altitude also troubled them.

"I've always said, even before coming here, that the high altitude is a problem for our players since the oxygen level is not too much. In the second half they were not giving enough effort as we would have liked," the coach opined.

But this victory was a crucial one for Bangladesh, Titu felt, as it eases their way towards the final.

Bangladesh will play their next match on March 5 against favourites India, who thrashed Bhutan 7-0 in the opening match on Friday. The top two teams will play in the final on March 10.

