

Bangladesh cricket's SOUMYA FALLACY

by EKUSH TAPADER from Chattogram

On Thursday, when it suddenly began to rain in Chattogram during the Bangladesh team's optional training session, all the players ran for cover, except one.

Soumya Sarkar, who got out for three against Sri Lanka in the first ODI, didn't want to leave the nets and continued training with a look of determination etched in his face.

The one bad innings against Sri Lanka had seemingly made everyone online forget about his previous ODI knock, a marvelous 169 against New Zealand, and the trolls once again began saying that he is in the national team only because of head coach Chandika Hathurusingha's preference.

This has been the perception surrounding Soumya for most of his career. If asked which Bangladeshi player has gotten the most number of chances over the years, the popular answer on social media would almost certainly be Soumya Sarkar. But is there any truth to this perception?

The reality is that Soumya has played only 68 of the 158 ODIs Bangladesh

have played since his debut in 2014, and only 10 since 2019.

When he came out to bat in the second ODI on Friday, Soumya knew his position in the team was on the line. Still, the left-hander hit an eye-catching 64-ball 68, which took his ODI run tally over 2000 in 64 innings, making him the quickest among all Bangladeshi batters to reach the milestone.

He broke the record of Liton Das and Shahriar Nafees, who had completed 2000 runs in 65 innings.

Soumya, a batter known to be inconsistent, becoming the fastest to reach 2000 ODI runs highlights the subpar standard of Bangladesh cricket and the fact that 81 cricketers in the world have done it in fewer matches just makes it even more apparent.

Soumya has been inconsistent for the majority of his career. He got a flying start in international cricket, averaging 49 after his first 16 ODIs at a strike rate of 102. But after not getting runs in a series against Afghanistan, Soumya lost his place in the side.

Since then he has been in and out of the team and has also been tried out in

different positions in the batting order.

The management and the selectors have been inconsistent about what they want from Soumya, making him bat lower down the order in 34 percent of his innings, highest among Bangladeshi openers.

He has batted at the middle-order and has even been tried out as a pace bowling all-rounder.

In the 42 innings where he has batted as an opener, he averages 36.92 at a strike rate of 100.07.

His career ODI strike rate of 97.48 is also head and shoulders above Bangladeshi batters who have played at least 50 ODIs, the next best being Liton Das with 86.68.

In a way, the century against New Zealand was Soumya's rebirth in international cricket and the half-century against Sri Lanka would probably earn him a few more chances. But if Soumya wants to change the perception about him on social media, the only thing he needs to do is perform consistently. And for that, the management needs to be consistent about what they want from the player.



Catlin shoots Asian Tour's first 59

AFP, Macau

John Catlin carded the first sub-60 round in Asian Tour history on Saturday, his 11-under-par 59 catapulting him into the lead at the International Series Macau.

The American rolled home a curling, left-to-right 15-foot putt on the final green for an eagle three as he moved to 18 under par after three rounds.

"I never, never, never thought I'd shoot 59," said a delighted, but slightly stunned, Catlin.

He has a two-shot cushion over LIV Golf's Jason Kokrak, who carded an eight-under-par 62, at the top of the leaderboard at the \$2 million event with one round to play.

Catlin, who was the Asian Tour player of the year in 2018, got off to a blistering start in his third round, draining six birdies for a front nine of 28 on the par-70 coastal layout at Macau Golf and Country Club.

He sank three more on the 11th, 13th and 17th before his beautifully judged eagle on the 564-yard, par-five 18th capped a historic round of golf.



PSG favourites in Barca clash: Xavi

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said on Saturday PSG were the favourites in their upcoming Champions League quarter-final tussle.

The Catalans, five-time winners of the competition, face former coach Luis Enrique's French champions, but although PSG are still looking to win the trophy for the first time, Xavi believes they are the stronger side.

"I'd give them the favourites tag -- we have won more Champions Leagues, but the economic situation they are in, signing players (compared to) what we can spend, it's not the same situation," Xavi told a news conference.

"They won't beat us on hope, desire, and dreaming though, we watched the draw together and the players are positive and looking forward to competing."

"We have to show it on the pitch -- it's easy to talk and then do nothing -- we must speak on the pitch, and show our talent and worth there."

The Spanish champions travel to Paris for the first leg on April 10, with the second leg at the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona on April 16.

Liton sidelined in 'most deserving' Jaker's favour

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh opener Liton Das was omitted from the 15-member squad for the third ODI against Sri Lanka, scheduled to take place in Chattogram tomorrow. The move comes on the heels of his persisting struggle with form, notably marked by consecutive dismissals for ducks in the ongoing home ODI series against the visitors.

With the series finely poised at 1-1 following Sri Lanka's three-wicket victory in the second match, the selectors deemed it imperative to offer the team greater flexibility and depth in batting resources. And thus, in Liton's place, promising talent Jaker Ali Anik has been drafted to bolster the middle-order options for the Tigers.

Despite his established credentials as an impact player who appears unstoppable when on song, Liton's recent statistics in ODIs paint a sobering picture of his struggles at the international level. Averaging just 24.11 since 2023, the elegant stroke-maker's inability to convert starts into substantial scores had long been raising concerns within the team management.

New chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain

Lipu iterated the rationale behind the decision, citing Liton's lacklustre performances in one-day internationals as the primary factor influencing the change.

"Since the series is ongoing, there is not much room for change. However, for being highly inconsistent in tacking the new ball, we are not keeping Liton for the third ODI," Lipu told the media.

For Jaker, this presents a golden opportunity to keep showcasing his ability to deliver under pressure on the international stage. While yet to debut in ODIs, the 26-year-old showcased glimpses of his potential during the preceding T20I series against the Lankans.

"We believe Jaker Ali's addition will provide the team with more options and flexibility in the middle-order," Lipu said, terming Jaker as "the most deserving candidate".

As the Bangladesh squad already possess backup openers in Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Anamul Haque Bijoy, the selectors did not opt for a like-for-like replacement.

"We took the opinions of the coach and the captain and we considered whether a middle-order batter could be Liton's replacement because there is a gap in the middle-order. Here, Jaker Ali Anik is a

suitable candidate as a keeper-batter," Lipu informed, adding that Jaker's ability to play both roles, at the top and as well as a finisher, has also worked in his favour.

Meanwhile, amidst Liton's struggles, esteemed coach Nazmul Abedeen Fahim has called for patience and support from the cricketing fraternity. Recognising the mental toll of prolonged lean patches, Fahim cautioned against subjecting Liton to undue pressure.

"I think it is important for the team management and all the players to support Liton and be by his side, considering that he might fail a few more times and that he would take some time to regain his form. As I said, it is a mental game. Putting pressure on him from the outside will only make things tougher for him," Fahim opined.

Drawing attention to the technical nuances of Liton's dismissals, Fahim highlighted the need for a balanced approach to batting.

"The delivery to which he got out [on Friday], it would not have been difficult for him to play that on the ground with soft hands. Maybe his body has gotten stiffer [as he has not been amongst runs recently]," Fahim said about Liton's dismissal.

"Not that he is taking things casually, he is cautious. But maybe he gets too cautious at times. It is very important to have confidence when batting. Things get trickier for him when the ball swings at the beginning of the innings," added the veteran coach.



Nigar and Co set for 'Waughesque' challenge, says Bashar

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday announced a 15-member women's team squad for their forthcoming maiden ODI series at home against world champions Australia, starting Thursday.

Australia are sending a full-strength team for the series, who are set to land in Dhaka today, and according to the BCB women's wing's chairman Habibul Bashar, facing the Alyssa Healy-led team will be as challenging for the Tigresses as facing the Steve Waugh-led men's Australia team in the late 90s was for the Tigers.

"The difference between the current Australia and Bangladesh women's teams is like the difference between Steve Waugh's Australia's team and the Bangladesh men's team of that time," Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.

"But as we will be playing at home, it is a good opportunity for us to show our strength. We don't get such opportunities too often," he added.

The selectors made two changes in the squad from the ODI series against South Africa in December, replacing the injured batter Shamima Sultana and all-rounder Lata Mondol with 15-year-old off-spinner Nishita Akter Nishi, who played two ODIs against Pakistan last year, and uncapped player Farzana Hoque Lisa, respectively.



BANGLADESH SQUAD

Nigar Sultana Joty (Captain), Nahida Akter (Vice Captain), Fargana Hoque Pinky, Murshida Khatun, Sobhana Mostary, Shorna Akter, Ritu Moni, Rabeya, Sultana Khatun, Fahima Khatun, Marufa Akter, Disha Biswas, Sumaiya Akter, Nishita Akter Nishi, Farzana Hoque Lisa.

ITINERARY

March 21: 1st ODI (9:30 am), Mirpur
March 24: 2nd ODI (9:30 am), Mirpur
March 27: 3rd ODI (9:30 am), Mirpur
March 31: 1st T20I (12 pm), Mirpur
April 02: 2nd T20I (12 pm), Mirpur
April 04: 3rd T20I (12 pm), Mirpur

"We picked Nishi, who has already played for the team. As Shamima is injured right now, we picked the uncapped Farzana as her replacement, who is a wicketkeeper-batter," explained women's team selector Sajjad Ahmed Shipon.

Lata, however, has been included in the standby list for the series alongside Fariha Islam Trisna and Shorifa Khatun.

The three-match ODI series is part of the ICC Women's Championship, where Bangladesh are currently positioned seventh among 10 teams.

Shipon said the team's main goal is to finish in the top six and to do so they are aiming to bag some points against the Aussies, who currently leading the table.

"Our main target is to earn some points from the ODI series. We want to finish in the top six of the points table. By doing that we can automatically qualify for ICC events... By doing this, we can take the country's women's cricket forward."

The women's team had a training camp in Khulna ahead of the series where they trained on good wickets, informed Shipon. The team returned to Dhaka yesterday.

The three ODIs will be played on March 21, 24 and 27, respectively. The 50-overs series will be followed by a three-match T20I series. All six matches will take place at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka.

Guardiola lauds Bellingham impact on 'exceptional' Madrid

REUTERS

Real Madrid are a different side compared to last season thanks to midfielder Jude Bellingham's "obvious" impact, Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said after his side were drawn to face the LaLiga club in the Champions League quarter-finals.

Holders City beat the 14-time Champions League winners in the Champions League semi-finals last season, drawing 1-1 away and securing a thumping 4-0 win at the Etihad in the second leg.

Bellingham, who joined Real from Borussia Dortmund in July for a fee of around 103 million euros (\$112.1 million), has scored 20 goals and set up nine for the Spanish side across all competitions this season.

Asked about the leading LaLiga goalscorer, the City manager told reporters on Friday: "(Bellingham's) impact has been massive. It's a different team from last season. His influence is obvious, and we have to try to discover what he does to control it."

"Facing Real Madrid is always a tough challenge, nobody can deny it. They are an exceptional club, and in this competition they can control many things with the experience they have in the past."

"Like last season there will be moments for them and moments for us. The longer we can keep our moments, we'll be closer. We'll try to do a good performance in Madrid and then here, with our people, do it again."

The first legs of the Champions League's



quarter-finals will be played from April 9-10 and second legs on April 16-17.

City play Newcastle United in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Saturday and face Arsenal in the Premier League after the international break.