

# Focus on range-hitting, batting depth in WC tune-up

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will take on Zimbabwe at Chattogram's Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in the first of five T20Is today, hoping to tick all the right boxes in terms of preparations for the upcoming T20 World Cup in June.

The middle and lower-middle-order batters, in particular, were going for range-hitting in yesterday's practice session, where Mahmudullah Riyad's strokeplay caught the attention of the media.

It was an optional session for the Tigers and skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto had only come for the press conference. Two pacers, Tanzim Hasan Sakib and Mohammad Saifuddin, along with spinner Tanvir Islam and Rishad Hossain attended the session. Alongside Mahmudullah, Jaker Ali and Afif Hossain, too, batted at the nets while Soumya Sarkar, outside the 15-member squad, worked on fitness.

Mahmudullah took one of Afif's bat to the session. He pointed to the shorter handle of the bat, to which Afif said, "Bhai, this bat is small. I don't use it in matches." The veteran, however, did not have any problem muddling his big shots.

Batting depth would be of importance heading to the World Cup and Tigers were furnishing options to that end. Shanto later said at the press conference that a

better depth in middle or lower-middle-order did not mean that batters at the top were going to play more freely.

The Bangladesh captain argued that players have the freedom to interpret what the side require according to scenarios.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

"No, it's not like we [top-order] will be batting freely because of that. Every player has the freedom and it doesn't matter who will bat at the latter part of the innings. Batters will bat according to their roles, and everyone has that freedom to bat with," Shanto said yesterday.

Range-hitting remains important to find big shots when needed. Rishad, in particular, suffered from batters' aggression but Mushtaq Ahmed, the newly appointed spin coach, was heard encouraging the leg-spinner, saying, "These things will happen, no matter."

Bangladesh's T20 batting suffers in all three stages: the Powerplay, middle-overs, and the death overs. Shanto also suggested that some boundaries late on are helpful. The T20 approach had seen some changes with top-order keener on taking advantage of field restrictions.

The Tigers were keeping that option open for the World Cup, keeping in mind injury concerns. "Everyone is in a good state. Soumya is not fully fit among top-order batters, but he is recovering well. [Parvez Hossain] Emon is there and there are a few options outside [the squad] like Naim Sheikh.

"Anyone can have an injury although we don't want that. We are preparing in a way so that if someone is required, they can be called upon," Shanto said.

Shanto was expecting high-scoring matches in Chattogram, where the first three T20Is will be held, and the practice session before the start of the series -- a crucial one for World Cup preparations -- gave impressions of the approach they were targeting.

Bangladesh suffered a seven-wicket defeat against Ireland in the last T20I played at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram in 2023.

However, the Tigers have won all the other three T20Is -- one against reigning T20 champions England, and two against Ireland -- at the same ground in Chattogram last year.

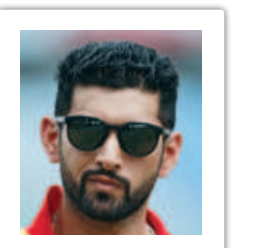
Bangladesh lost the only other T20I series played this year when the Tigers suffered a 2-1 defeat against Sri Lanka in March.

The Tigers boast 13 wins and seven defeats in the 20 T20Is played against Zimbabwe so far.

Zimbabwe had the upper hand in the last T20I series played against Bangladesh. They won 2-1 at home against the Tigers in 2022.

However, the Tigers eked out a three-run victory in their last T20I meeting against the African nation during the 2022 T20 World Cup in Brisbane.

**Both countries have a lot of things on the line. Bangladesh have a World Cup to look forward to and the combination of the team and all that. We have a legacy and we have our own missions to accomplish. So, I think it will be a very good series.**



Zimbabwe captain SIKANDAR RAZA

## 'We are going through a tough time'

SPORTS REPORTER

When opener Dilara Akter provided a fine start in the Powerplay, it appeared that the Bangladesh women's cricket team would finally be able to turn back the tide in their batting department.

However, poor batting in the middle and death overs let down the hosts as India went on to win the third Twenty20 International by seven wickets at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday to take an unassailable 3-0 lead with two games still to go.

Dilara started the Powerplay well and showed her ability to pick up boundaries in a 27-ball 39. But following the 46-run opening stand between Dilara and Murshida Khatun (nine off 16), no considerable partnerships developed.

Captain Nigar Sultana Joty struck 28 off 36 but the fall of Sobhana Mostary (15 off 20) and Fahima Khatun (0) in consecutive deliveries in the 14th



over did not allow the Tigresses to get the scoring-rate up as they ended on 117 for 8.

"We started well in the powerplay and then we started to lose wickets back-to-back. Also, we could not finish well in the 15-20 overs," Joty said at the post-match presentation ceremony after Bangladesh's sixth successive loss in T20Is.

"This team has been doing well for the last six months and we are going through a tough time right now. Still, I think we should keep ourselves calm, believe in ourselves and focus on the process," she added.

Joty praised Dilara's knock but wished, "She could have gone further and picked up her first 50."

India openers Smriti Mandhana (47 off 42) and Shafali Verma picked up 59 runs in the Powerplay, punishing the Bangladesh bowling.

The opening duo put up a 91-run stand before Shafali departed to a brilliant one-handed caught and bowled effort from Ritu Moni after a 38-ball 51.

India lost two more wickets but sailed home in 18.3 overs.

"The bowlers are doing well but the batting department is letting us down. Still, the way we bowled in the Powerplay was a matter of concern. After powerplay, we bowled really well. Nahida [Akter] and the other bowlers made a good comeback at the end of the innings," Joty said, hoping for a better showing in the remaining games.

# Poor outfield at ZACS puts cricketers at injury risk

EKUSH TAPADER from Chattogram

Bangladesh will begin their five-match Twenty20 International series against Zimbabwe today at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram on an outfield that has certainly seen better days.

Dead grass, red soil with some patches of green sprinkled across the field which only highlights the overall bareness of it, that's how the venue looked a day before the match.

The dearth of live grass on the outfield will put the fielders at risk of injuries whenever they dive to take a catch or stop the ball.

Soumya Sarkar is not part of the squad for the first three T20Is as he is still recovering from a knee injury he suffered while trying to save a boundary in the third ODI against Sri Lanka at this very ground in March.

The incident happened in the last ball of the 49th over when Soumya tripped over the boundary rope and landed on his left knee quite hard on the bare-looking surface and the subsequent injury has kept him out of action since.

Similar injuries will very much be on the cards in the three matches Bangladesh are scheduled to play at the venue, which is the last thing the Tigers would want so close to the ICC Twenty20 World Cup in June.

The country just passed the hottest April in recorded history, which has caused a severe water shortage in the region with locals living in the Kattoli area, which is adjacent to the stadium, claiming that the Chattogram WASA has been unable to ensure sufficient water supply.

The groundsmen informed that the outfield requires 4,00,000 litre of water daily but currently the ground is getting less than that in a week.

However, Chattogram WASA chief engineer Maksud Alam denied any shortage in water supply for the stadium.

"There is an express water line for the ground. We provide water through the express water line. Whenever they ask for it, we supply. They get water through the line at the scheduled time. An when they say they require more water, we provide that as well," Maksud told The Daily Star over the phone.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

He, however, accepted that there is a water crisis in the area but said that the water supply at the stadium is unaffected by it.

"There is a shortage of water as in the summer the water level goes down. Still, we have prioritised it [the stadium] and have installed an express water line for it. We supply water there, even if we have to suspend supply to other places." Bangladesh Cricket Board

(BCB) ground committee manager Abdul Baten also said that the blame didn't lie squarely on WASA.

"There is nothing else WASA can do about this. Every stadium has its own deep tube well. In Chattogram, we get salt water from the deep tube well. That's the main issue. Moreover, it hasn't rained for a while. But we are working to fix it." Many cricket grounds

in the world, like the Dubai International Stadium, have a desalination plant which is used to turn sea water into fresh water which can be used to water the outfield. Installing a plant like that at the venue could be a permanent solution. However, as the stadium is under the jurisdiction of the National Sports Council, not the BCB, there is no guarantee how long it would take to solve the issue.

# Can 'warrior' Fizz channel CSK sizzle to national colours?

STAR SPORTS DESK

Mustafizur Rahman, Bangladesh's sole representative in the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL), kept delivering the goods till his final outing for holders Chennai Super Kings (CSK), pouring cold water over the consensus that the left-arm pacer can no longer take his place for granted in the national team.

Against Punjab in a seven-wicket defeat at the Chepauk on Wednesday, Mustafizur "the Fizz" impressed despite going wicketless for the first time this edition. He showcased his miserly side, conceding under six runs in four overs and, in the process, bowling a rare maiden over -- the sixth in the ongoing edition and the first by a foreign recruit.

Starting with a four-for in the competition's curtain-raiser, the Fizz ended his campaign with team-high 14 wickets, second overall behind Mumbai Indians' Jasprit Bumrah who tops the chart due to a superior average.

Moreover, the 28-year-old displayed variations in his arsenal apart from the go-to off-cutters: the ability to bowl seam-up and getting the ball to move into the right-hander, among others.

Mustafizur, whose NOC expired

yesterday owing to the five-match home T20I series against Zimbabwe, beginning today, had sparked a club-versus-country debate with the T20 World Cup fast-approaching in June.

However, for Mustafizur, the nine matches he played for Chennai worked wonders in recovering from a lean patch he had experienced in national colours earlier this year -- evidenced by his lacklustre show in the three T20I against Sri Lanka in Sylhet in March where he tallied just two wickets for a staggering 131 runs.

Esteemed coach and analyst, Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, perhaps hit the nail on the head on Mustafizur's turnaround, saying, "Psychology has a complex relationship with cricket performance."

"A warrior has nothing if he loses faith in himself. And CSK has enabled Mustafizur regaining lost self-belief," Fahim wrote on his Facebook page following the Chennai-Punjab clash.

Now that form is not an issue for Mustafizur, it remains to be seen whether the country's all-time second-top wicket-taker in T20Is will be back to being irreplaceable or play second fiddle in the Tigers' pace battery.



# Sancho upstages Mbappe, Kroos' quality reigns supreme

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Enthralling first-leg semifinals in the Champions League have left the fate of the return legs in greater anticipation and in edge-of-the-seat poise, with Borussia Dortmund upstaging Kylian Mbappe's PSG in Germany and 14-time winners Real Madrid snatching a draw against Bayern Munich away from home.

It was Jadon Sancho's mercurial grace and a moment of technical genius from striker Niclas Füllkrug that outshone PSG and Mbappe at the Signal Iduna Park as Dortmund attained the upper hand with a slender 1-0 advantage before the second leg at the Parc des Princes on May 8.

On loan from Manchester United, Sancho seemed to have found his mojo and turned the pitch into his dancefloor as he completed 12 dribbles, the most by any player in a Champions League semifinal since Lionel Messi managed 16 against the Red Devils in 2008. Out of favour in Manchester, Sancho never managed more than six take-ons



PHOTO: AFP

with the club and could never really dish out his best.

On Thursday, PSG left-back Nuno Mendes sure saw the best of the winger, who had 99 touches in the game, the second-most on the pitch, and 29 carries in a menacing 90 minutes.

Dortmund, however, could manage a slender lead in the 36th minute, courtesy of Füllkrug who smartly broke free of the offside trap and received a long

ball over the backline with sheer guile with his right foot before hammering home with his left.

In the second half, Füllkrug could've doubled the lead after Sancho's brilliant drop of the shoulder, squandering the opportunity by shinning over the crossbar from eight yards out.

Sancho created three clear-cut chances for his teammates and at least one certainly should have led to a goal.

**KROOS THROWS HIS WEIGHT AROUND**

Bayern seemed to have found their groove in the first 20 minutes of the game but Real did what they so often do on the biggest stage -- they hit back against the run of play and so often when no one expects them to.

Kroos, playing in his 10th UCL semifinal, had recycled the ball in a relatively harmless position on the pitch, and subsequently, Real forward Vinicius Jr began to move, not towards the goal but towards his own half as if he was looking to take one short and then run at the defenders.

Vinicius was closely guarded by Bayern centre-back Kim-Min Jae, who followed the forward inward, and after a wand-like gesture pointing Vinicius to make a run, Kroos, who completed 79 of the 82 passes he attempted, threaded the needle with a pass that did not seem to be on. Vinicius had no doubt about the quality of the ball played and finished it past Manuel Neuer to bring Real the lead.