

Combinations key as Shakib, Fizz and Soumya come in

SPORTS REPORTER

After Bangladesh took an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match Twenty20 International series against Zimbabwe, opener Parvez Hossain Emon and batter Afif Hossain were eventually left out of the Tigers' squad for the last two T20Is, to be played in Dhaka, without having played a game.

Parvez and Afif's exclusion were largely expected as the two more senior stars in Shakib Al Hasan and Soumya Sarkar were included, with the former returning to the T20I lineup after a gap of 10 months.

It also became apparent that the team management's plans for the forthcoming T20 World Cup did not have those two players in a big way. With Shakib's preparations and Soumya's injury rehabilitation prioritised, the two made up the numbers.

However, selector Abdur Razzak yesterday informed in a video message that all the players who were in the squad are still "in" the system.

For pacers Shoriful Islam and Mustafizur "Fizz"



Rahman, workload management was prioritized, with the Tigers slated to depart soon for the USA to play a series against the hosts before they begin their World Cup campaign in Dallas. While Shoriful was "rested" for the rest of the Zimbabwe series, Mustafizur, who had enjoyed a few days' rest following return from Indian Premier League, was included in his place.

"Shoriful has been rested to give time to his family and we did that before with Mustafizur when he returned from India. Shoriful had been playing high-intensity matches for a while and also played Premier League matches. He is getting time off to recharge himself," Razzak informed.

The main concerns in the Tigers camp would be the injury troubles of a few stars such as Soumya and Mohammad Saifuddin. Following the third T20I in Chattogram, the selectors and head coach sat down with the two players to discuss plans going forward.

Given head coach Chandika Hathurusingha's preference on fit players, both Saifuddin and Soumya, who has only recently made a recovery, were on the agenda of the discussions.

Soumya had recently bowled quite a bit since his recovery and the team management will be keen on his bowling contributions, and fielding as well. Saifuddin made a good comeback to the national team but his performances in death overs against an opponent such as Zimbabwe may not have assured the team management wholly.

Shakib, meanwhile, will look to switch gears from one-day to T20Is but his presence would help further the team management's plans going forward.

Apart from injuries, the other problem Tigers would face is the presence of left-handed batters in the top-order. Along with Soumya and Shakib, there is Tanzid Hasan and skipper Najmul Hossain, who are all likely to play at the top. Combinations would be crucial to the Tigers' plans as opponents would look to capitalise on such a heavy presence of left-handers at the top.

There are only a few shake-ups available to the Tigers in terms of their 15-member squad. In the end, the assessment of wickets in the USA and West Indies would also be key in picking between extra spinners and pacers as left-arm orthodox spinner Tanvir Islam and pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib await their World Cup ticket.



THE YELLOW WALL STANDS FIRM

Borussia Dortmund players celebrate after stunning Kylian Mbappe and PSG in their Champions League semifinal second leg at the Parc des Princes on Tuesday, winning 1-0 on the night, courtesy of a Mats Hummels header, and advancing 2-0 on aggregate to next month's final at Wembley. Dortmund went into the tie as underdogs but upstaged Mbappe's PSG to cement their first final since 2013. Edin Terzic's side suffered a host of menacing PSG attacks in the second leg and had to see PSG hit the woodwork four times on the night but held their own to keep back-to-back clean sheets. [Inset] Meanwhile, PSG star Mbappe looks dejected as his efforts were not enough to overturn the deficit but got close to making his mark when he hit the woodwork.

PHOTO: X/REUTERS

'Nobody expected Dortmund to make it'

AGENCIES

Borussia Dortmund were not on anyone's Champions League radar when the season started but the club's sensational run to the final with a 2-0 aggregate win over Paris St Germain on Tuesday proved their plan was right all along, said coach Edin Terzic.

Dortmund came into the season on the back of a bitter Bundesliga title loss on the final matchday of the previous campaign. And while their league results quickly confirmed Terzic's team did not have the consistency to be a serious title contender this season, it was a different story in Europe.

"We wanted to be the team that will not necessarily be on anyone's radar. That road has been unbelievable," Terzic said, referring to his side's run in the tournament, having cruised through their group with only one loss in six matches against PSG, AC Milan and Newcastle United.

Borussia Dortmund veteran Marco Reus said "nobody expected us to make it" as his side booked a return to Wembley's Champions League final, with the role of chief architect played by veteran defender Mats Hummels, who added a goal of his own in the second leg and was named man of the match by UEFA in both games.

Alongside centre-back partner Nico Schlotterbeck, Hummels



➔ Dortmund secured their third final berth in the Champions League, having won the title in their first appearance in 1997.

➔ Mats Hummels and Marco Reus are heading back to Wembley for the final, where Dortmund last featured in the showpiece in 2013.

➔ Hummels, aged 35 years and 143 days, became the oldest German ever to score a goal in a Champions League knockout match, scoring for BVB in the competition for the first time since February 2013.

➔ PSG attempted 30 shots in the second leg, hitting the woodwork four times. No team since 2003-04 had hit the woodwork more than three times without scoring in a Champions League match.

stood tall, helping Dortmund keep PSG's array of attacking talent including their standout forward Kylian Mbappe at bay across both ties.

Speaking after the match, coach Terzic said the return of Hummels and Reus to Wembley was "the beautiful side of football".

Reus said, "What a week for me personally. To finish in the Champions League final, where it all started for me in 2013 -- more than 10 years later!"

As far as Hummels is concerned, his side were not content simply with another appearance in the final. "There's no reason to believe that we can't do it," he said.

Hummels' contract expires at the end of the season and he has said he will not decide until the summer where he plays next season.

But while the veteran may join Reus in walking off into the Westfalenstadion sunset, his whereabouts on the first Saturday in June remains clear.

Another record beckons Leverkusen

AFP, Berlin

Xabi Alonso's rampaging Bayer Leverkusen will have an additional incentive in Thursday's home second leg Europa League semifinal against Roma: breaking a 59-year-old European football record.

Avoiding defeat against Roma on Thursday will not only mean a trip to Dublin for the Europa League final, it will also extend their unbeaten run to 49 games -- the best mark in European football history.

A Eusebio-inspired Benfica went on a 48-game unbeaten streak between 1963 and 1965. The record has stood since, but Leverkusen have a golden chance of blowing it out of the water.

Alonso's side have already overtaken Juventus' 43-match unbeaten run from 2011 to 2012, which was the best of a team in the top five European leagues.

Leverkusen won 2-0 in Rome last week and could progress to the final even with a one-goal loss, but breaking the record would be yet another outstanding achievement in an already brilliant season.

Speaking after Leverkusen equalled Benfica's record with a 5-1 win at Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday, Leverkusen goalkeeper and captain Lukas Hradecky said pursuit of an unbeaten season gave his side "extra motivation".

"It's close," said Hradecky after the game, explaining "I can tell my granddaughter and grandson about this."



➔ Unbeaten this season, Bayer Leverkusen won nine out of their 11 Europa League fixtures this season.

➔ A win for Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen against Roma in their Europa League semifinal second-leg at home will not only see the reigning German champions progress to the final but also Benfica's 48-game unbeaten streak -- the best mark in European football history.

➔ Before the start of the season, Leverkusen had just two major trophies in their history -- DFB Pokal in 1992/93 and the UEFA Cup in 1987/88. With the Bundesliga already under their belt, Alonso's side could more than double their historical trophy haul -- if they win the Europa League and the DFB Pokal final against Kaiserslautern.

The Finn was referring to the league season, where Leverkusen have two more games to become the first team to go a Bundesliga campaign without defeat, but they are just five matches away from an unbeaten treble.

Even with Alonso forced to watch from the stands due to a yellow card suspension, Leverkusen were not troubled against Frankfurt.

Already crowned Bundesliga champions for the first time back in April, Leverkusen are through to the German Cup final, where they face second-division Kaiserslautern.

Avoiding defeat on Thursday will set up a meeting with either Atalanta or Marseille

in the Europa League final in Dublin. Leverkusen have managed to keep their stunning run going despite Alonso deciding to rest players.

Attacking midfielder Florian Wirtz and wing-back Alex Grimaldo were left out of the squad entirely on Sunday.

"They had small complaints in the last few days. We didn't want to take any risks," Alonso said.

"They'll train again from Tuesday." With close to a full strength squad and playing at home for the second-last time this season, breaking Benfica's record on Thursday could be the next step in Leverkusen's great future.

Rejuvenated Scamacca seeks European glory

AFP, Milan

Gianluca Scamacca will lead the line in Atalanta's bid to reach their first ever European final as the striker's hot form puts him firmly in the frame for Euro 2024.

A classic centre-forward, Scamacca has had an up-and-down first season back in Italy with Atalanta but is in the form of his life on the eve of Thursday's second leg of their Europa League semifinal with Marseille.

The 25-year-old has scored 10 times and set up another in his last 12 matches, and his fizzing low finish last week ensured Atalanta came away from the Stade Velodrome with a 1-1 draw after having their backs to the wall for large parts of the first leg in southern France.

He will be the focal point of Atalanta's exciting attack in front of passionate home fans in Bergamo who have once again seen their traditionally provincial club punch way above its weight.

Scamacca has scored 18 goals in all competitions this term with the bulk of those strikes coming after he was left out of the Italy squad for March's friendlies with Venezuela and Ecuador.

Scamacca's form has come at a perfect time for both club and country, as Italy defend their European Championship title in Germany this summer after missing out on a second consecutive World Cup.

Atalanta meanwhile, whose trophy cabinet contains seven lower league titles and the 1963 Italian Cup, are looking to go one better than in 1988 when they reached the last four of the Cup Winners' Cup as a Serie B team.

Gian Piero Gasperini's side have, like Scamacca, been inconsistent for much of the season but are eyeing a historic climax to the campaign, with an Italian Cup final with Juventus coming up next week and Champions League qualification also up for grabs. Scamacca netted in Atalanta's

hard-fought win at relegated Salernitana on Monday which moved his team into Serie A's fifth and final spot for Europe's elite club competition.

The next fortnight will decide whether Atalanta finally win a trophy which would be just reward for years of investment and development which have taken Atalanta from nowhere to the brink of European glory.



SHORT CORNER

Nadal welcomes unusual role of underdog
Spanish tennis legend Rafael Nadal said on Wednesday he was "excited to be playing in Rome" despite entering the Italian Open unseeded and ranked 305. "All the matches are tough for me today, difficult and more unpredictable than what they used to be for me, especially on clay," the 37-year-old, 10-time Italian Open winner said.

PNG stick with experience in T20 WC squad

Ready for their second appearance at the ICC Men's T20 World Cup, Papua New Guinea have named their 15-member squad set to feature in Group C at the tournament. Vala is one of 10 players from their 2021 campaign, with 2021 reserve member Jack Gardner this time picked in the 15-player group. Leg-spinning all-rounder CJ Amini will deputise Vala as vice-captain.

I hope my bat will smile: Liton
Bangladesh batter Liton Das backed his style of batsmanship and said he hoped he would come out of his batting rut after he made the headlines for being dismissed in an appalling fashion in the third T20I of the five-match series against Zimbabwe in Chattogram.

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