

SPORT

What to WATCH

T SPORTS
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Live from 8:00 pm
STAR SPORTSSELECT HD1
English Premier League
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(Tuesday)

Has the Saifuddin bubble burst?

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Much of Mohammad Saifuddin's supposed reputation as a pace-bowling all-rounder is built on hype.

Sure, Saifuddin has dishd out glimpses of his talents with bat and ball in domestic competitions but can those sparks of promise in lower quality contests be used to solidify faith in the 27-year-old heading into the T20 World Cup in June?

Saifuddin got his bearings wrong and was all over the place in Bangladesh's eight-wicket loss in the fifth and final T20I against Zimbabwe yesterday in Mirpur. The right-arm seamer struggled to keep a lid on things and was picked apart for 55 runs in his four overs, including a 19-run penultimate over which helped a relatively feeble Zimbabwe pick up their only win in the tour in what has been an ordinary series for the visitors.

A bubble has been inflated by fans and experts alike around the inclusion of Saifuddin, a player who is the only pace-bowling all-round option in this current Bangladesh side.

What aspects of Saifuddin's skillset are Bangladesh looking for?

Fundamentally, the Tigers should be looking to use



Saifuddin for his bowling, particularly at the death. He has a reputation for finding the blockhole and bowling spearing yorkers in domestic competitions and this perception has often brought him to the fore whenever the Tigers have faced a death bowling crisis. But how often has he been able to deliver on his strength?

Saifuddin has often resorted to the change of pace, pitching halfway onto the pitch instead of going for what he was known for in his Under-19 days -- executing yorkers, almost at will.

The ongoing series was a test for the 27-year-old to see how he holds up in the five-match series, at least fitness-wise. He has picked up eight wickets in the four matches at an economy rate of 9.31 and has been used by skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto in all three phases of the innings.

With Shoriful Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, and Taskin Ahmed -- the latter's inclusion for the T20 World Cup being subject to his recovery from his recent rib cage injury -- making up the pace-bowling line-up, the Tigers can't really use Saifuddin as a strike bowler as he bowls at a gentle pace and would have a hard time unsettling batters with pace. He can be a useful option in the middle overs due to his expertise in changing the pace but much of his usefulness will depend on whether he can get his yorkers right.

In the Zimbabwe series, Saifuddin, despite the reputation for bowling vicious yorkers, stuck to his toothless slower-ball bouncers and often was taken for boundaries. Of the 96 balls he bowled in the series, only six were yorkers (6.25 percent). He conceded the least amount of runs -- only three -- with those deliveries and picked up two wickets.

In Saifuddin's case, often his role as a lower-middle-order batter, who can come with some lusty blows at the death, is brought to the fore. But how much can the batter Saifuddin deliver in such scenarios? He scored 101 runs in this DPL at a strike rate of 100 in 10 innings -- a stat that does very little to make his case as an explosive batter lower down the order, especially when considered the sub-standard domestic league.

Maybe it is time for the Bangladesh team management to call a spade a spade and rethink what they are looking for from Saifuddin.



Finally, the scares turned into reality as Zimbabwe, powered by fifties from opener Brian Bennett and skipper Sikandar Raza, crushed hosts Bangladesh by eight wickets in the final match of the five-match T20I series in Mirpur yesterday. Even though the Tigers took home the series 4-1, Zimbabwe had come alarmingly close in the third and fourth T20I before eventually getting the upper hand in yesterday's game. [Bottom] Following the match, Shakib Al Hasan was happy to take selfies with fans -- a sight contrasting to what had happened a few days back when a fan found his way into the ground to take a picture with the star all-rounder during a Dhaka Premier League game in BKSP.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

A hollow series win and the lingering concerns

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh fell short of completing a clean sweep over Zimbabwe in the five-match Twenty20 International series, losing the last game by eight wickets in Mirpur yesterday, however, clinched the series by a dominant 4-1 margin.

But the series was not as one-sided as the 4-1 margin would suggest with the Tigers' batting frailties getting exposed multiple times against an average bowling attack which resulted in a couple of close contests in the third and fourth T20Is, where the hosts won owing the visitors' own batting woes.

The nine and five-run victories in the third and fourth match respectively followed by the comprehensive defeat in the final game are raising concerns over the team's preparedness for the challenges that wait for them in the forthcoming ICC T20 World Cup.

However, skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto claimed that they have successfully crossed out the things they wanted to check in the series and said that winning the close contests have raised the team's confidence.

"We were serious in all the games. We didn't want to lose a game neither do we feel we needed to lose [to get a reality check]. I think we had a very good series," Shanto said at the press conference yesterday after the game.

"We had a few close games and in those scenarios, we practiced how the bowlers would execute their plans and how we can remain calm. You could say that in those close matches the game was in their hands and we were able to comeback. The way we did that

is a positive sign which will work well for us in the tournament," he added.

There were some encouraging signs in the batting department, with opener Tanzid Tamim looking confident with his approach while Towhid Hridoy remaining fluid throughout the series.

Jaker Ali Anik put finishing touches to a few innings and Mahmudullah Riyad turned up too at times, like he did with a 54 in the fifth T20I.

The bowlers performed up to expectations barring the final game with an inspired Taskin Ahmed picking up the player-of-the-series award while leg-spinner Rishad Hossain also staked his claims for a place in the World Cup side.

There were a few lose ends with Mohammad Saifuddin and Tanzim Sakib's death-over displays but Mustafizur Rahman and Shakib Al Hasan's bowling since their return showed that the bowling group has depth.

Yet, the way the batting line-up crumbled in the fourth T20I after a 101-run opening stand between Tanzid and Soumya Sarkar is a worrying sign.

Shanto, however, felt the wickets used in the series played a role in the batting woes.

"The wickets were not batting friendly throughout the series. The batters tried to play well and assessed the wickets while batting," said the skipper.

Shakib and Shanto's batting form will be added concern alongside Liton Das's exploits this series, who was dropped from the final two T20Is. Given that the World Cup is just a few weeks away, Najmul and Co have their work cut out as they have very little time to work on the shortcomings exposed in this series.



It's 50-50, says Taskin on injury

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh's pace spearhead Taskin Ahmed suffered an injury to his rib cage during the fourth game of the five-match T20I series against Zimbabwe, upsetting the team's plans for the upcoming T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies.

The 29-year-old pacer looked in supreme form during the first four matches of the series, taking eight wickets and winning the player of the series award.

"I still have pain. Will do the scan and later can say about the severity of the injury but it seems 50-50," Taskin, casting doubts over his inclusion for the T20 mega event starting on June 2, told reporters before leaving the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium on Sunday.

Bangladesh Cricket Board's chief physician Dr Debashish Chowdhury told The Daily Star: "Taskin has an injury on his 12th rib on the right side which he suffered while diving in the last (fourth) game. He also had considerable pain today and we are sending him for scan."

The BCB physician further said that they can only confirm whether there is a fracture after getting the scan report. "In cases of side strain, initially there is quite a bit of pain for the first two-three days whether fracture is there or not."

Talking to reporters during the match, BCB president Nazmul Hassan Papon said that they would wait for the report to take a decision on the treatment of the player as well as the announcement of the squad for the T20 World Cup today.

As things stand, a repeat of the grim event in 2019 looms when the pacer was left in tears when an injury forced him out of the squad for the 50-over that year.



Arsenal forward Leandro Trossard celebrates after scoring in his side's 1-0 win over Manchester United at Old Trafford yesterday. The win meant the Gunners kept their Premier League title dreams alive as they moved back to the top of the table. Trossard scored the only goal in the 20th minute as Arsenal won for just the second time in 17 games away at United to go a point clear of Manchester City at the summit. City still have the destiny of the title in their own hands as the defending champions have two matches left to Arsenal's one.

PHOTO: AFP

'Financial strength' biggest factor behind Kings' success

SPORTS REPORTER

As Bashundhara Kings celebrated their historic fifth consecutive top-tier league title on Saturday, their closes rivals Mohammedan and Abahani -- two of the most illustrious football clubs of the country -- were left to rue the disparaging financial stability between the champions and the rest of the teams in the Bangladesh Premier League.

Kings beat Mohammedan 2-1 in Mymensingh on Saturday, confirming their fifth BPL title on the trot with three games in hand, and in the process avenging for the only defeat of the season on the Black and Whites.

Alfaz Ahmed, who led a sort of revival of Mohammedan by leading the Motijheel club to Federation Cup title last year and already leading the team to two competitions this season -- felt the finances of Kings make it hard even for clubs like Mohammedan compete.

"When you want to become champions, you need some national players and quality foreign players along with sound financial backing. Kings have all three of those components. They have a champion



'The power of 16 driving Kings'

Read the full interview of Bashundhara Kings president Imrul Hasan on The Daily Star website.

team with 16 national players and quality foreign players," Alfaz Ahmed told The Daily Star, also admitting that Kings handle everything in a professional way and provide all the modern facilities to the players.

Alfaz, however, pointed out a pertinent aspect in Kings' strategy which he believes breaks the balance

of other teams.

"Whenever a promising player emerges in the league, Kings rope in that player to strength their squad while weakening other teams. This may be a part of Kings' strategy," Alfaz said, adding that a lot of promising young players end up warming the bench due to this practice.

Abahani manager and former national player Nazrul Islam also echoed the same sentiment.

"We are behind Kings when it comes to quality of foreign players even though there is hardly any difference among the local players. They spend big every season and sign the promising players from the current season," said Nazrul.

Country's successful coach Maruful Haque, who has not coached a club this season, was more forthright in his observation.

"No other team in Bangladesh's history had the luxury to keep so many national team players on the reserve bench. Kings formed the squad with all A-category and B-category players and no team can get those players even if they try because of the high payment to the players, which is really abnormal in the transfer market," opined Haque.