

Walls closing in on CAPTAIN SHANTO

ASHFAQ UL-ALAM

"Leadership is an amazing disease. It either cures you or kills you," Sourav Ganguly, considered one of the greatest captains ever to lead India in cricket, wrote this back in 2018 in an article for 'The Economic Times'.

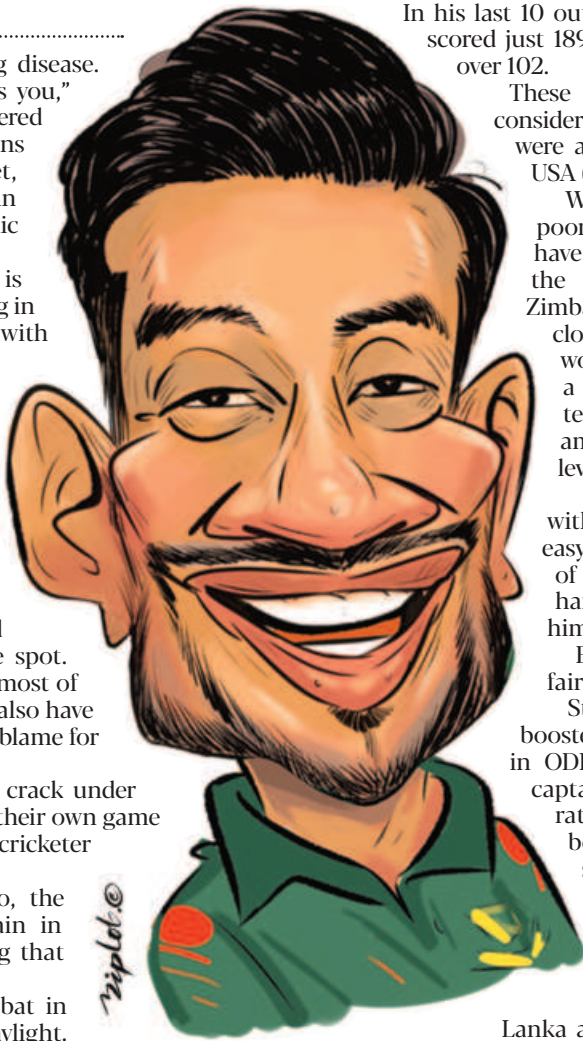
As the person who is widely credited for ushering in a new era in Indian cricket with his aggressive captaincy, Ganguly's thoughts on leadership, at least when it comes to cricket, hold considerable weight.

Cricket is unique to most other major team sports when it comes to captaincy. In cricket, the captain has to marshal his troops on the field and make tactical calls on the spot. In return, they get to take most of the credit for victories but also have to bear the majority of the blame for defeats.

The best of players can crack under this pressure, lose sight of their own game and become a shell of the cricketer they once were.

Najmul Hossain Shanto, the current Bangladesh captain in all three formats, is feeling that pressure right now.

His struggles with the bat in T20s are as clear as daylight.



In his last 10 outings in the format, Shanto has scored just 189 runs at a strike rate of a little over 102.

These numbers look even direr considering that seven of those innings were against Zimbabwe (five) and the USA (two).

While Shanto's form has been poor, his team's recent performances have been shambolic. After winning the five-match series against Zimbabwe 4-1, a series that was more closely contested than the margin would suggest, the Tigers suffered a 2-1 series defeat to the USA, a team that is not even considered among the best at the associate level.

Considering his performances with the bat in T20s, it would be easy to conclude that the pressure of captaincy is getting to the left-hander, which in turn has reduced him to an inferior batter.

But that would not be entirely fair to him.

Statistics show that captaincy has boosted Shanto's pedigree as a batter in ODIs. In his nine innings as ODI captain, Shanto averages 52 at a strike rate of 92.15, which is considerably better than his average (29.44) and scoring rate (78.26) when playing without captaincy.

In Tests, Shanto's average has taken a slight hit since becoming captain, owing to the lean series against Sri Lanka at home earlier in March where

he scored 32 runs in four innings.

But he also has a match-winning second innings hundred to his name against New Zealand in Sylhet last year, which helped the Tigers seal their maiden home Test win over the Kiwis.

So, why has his performance been this poor in the lead up to the ICC T20 World Cup 2024, his first major tournament as captain?

For starters, T20Is have always been Shanto's weakest format in international cricket.

In ODIs, his average has been on the rise after a lean start. In Tests, although his average remains a shade below 30, his conversion rate is excellent, having hit five Test hundreds, three of which have come inside the last 12 months, and three fifties.

But in T20Is, his career strike rate of 109.64 is poor even by Bangladesh standard. Among the Bangladesh batters who have made at least 350 runs in T20Is, Shanto's strike rate is second worst behind opener Mohammad Naim (103.42).

Shanto plays the anchor role for Bangladesh, a role that is quickly getting antiquated in T20s, which means he is supposed to bat deep into the innings while the batters at the other end take more risks.

He was growing into the role in the last two years, averaging just over 30 in both 2022 and 2023 at a strike rate of 110.39 and 119.78 respectively.

Shanto was seemingly turning a corner in his T20I career before his progress got torpedoed after getting the captaincy. Since becoming captain, his scoring rate has dipped to 105.50, and his average (20.90) has also dipped by almost six runs per innings.

With the T20 World Cup knocking at the door, his own form waning and the top-order looking fragile, Shanto right now is under a world of pressure.

He might put on a charade of calm on the outside, as he should as captain, but with runs drying up from his bat and his team at rock bottom, the walls are well and truly closing in on Shanto.

Starc 'the x-factor'

REUTERS

A slow start in the Indian Premier League put Mitchell Starc's record price tag under the microscope but the Australian all-format hero underlined his worth as he lifted Kolkata Knight Riders to a third title.

Starc was adjudged Player of the Match for his figures of 3-0-14-2 against Sunrisers Hyderabad on Sunday, leading to an emphatic victory with eight wickets and 57 balls left in the bank.

Starc, Pat Cummins and Travis Head, who was out for a golden duck in the final, will link up with the rest of Australia's T20 World Cup squad in the coming days ahead of their opener against Oman next week.

Captain Mitchell Marsh said Australia felt lucky to have "world-class" Starc.

"We know that Starc is the X-factor, and you see throughout T20 cricket these days it's the X-factor players who win you games, win you tournaments," Marsh said after training in Trinidad.

Tigers hope for form reversal

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will take on the USA in their first World Cup warm-up match at Grand Prairie Stadium in Dallas on Tuesday, hoping for a drastic turnaround in form following their series loss against the same opposition in Houston.

The match will begin at 9:30pm Bangladesh Time.

Having been the first-ever Test-playing nation to lose a series against the USA with successive losses in the first two matches, Bangladesh recorded their first win on US soil in the final T20I of the three-match series. The 10-wicket win in the dead rubber came against a USA side that had rested a number of their key players.

The dominating win saw Mustafizur Rahman grab the limelight with record bowling figures of six for 10 while leg-spinner Rishad Hossain also impressed with the ball.

At the top of the batting order, both openers -- Tanzid Tamim and Soumya Sarkar -- found some runs and the Tigers would be hoping to gain more momentum in the warm-up matches before the event proper.

Rash shots had been a big part of Bangladesh's batting failure in the second T20I against the USA, where they made a



Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) revealed the official jersey that the Tigers will don in the upcoming T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies in a Facebook post on Monday.

meal out of an easy chase despite having wickets in hand.

The chairman of the selection panel, Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu, while talking to the media on Saturday, rued the fact that the team were not playing according to the match situation -- a problem that has often remained evident in Tigers' T20I outings.

"We need to play according to the call of the hour. If we need to hit fours and sixes, we need to do that. And, if we see we need to play for singles with one or two boundaries

here and there, we need to follow that. But, unfortunately, we are failing to do so," Lipu said. Liton Das, who has been struggling to get runs in the white-ball formats for a while now, had returned to the lineup for the third T20I but did not get to bat while Jaker Ali's wicketkeeping has also come under the radar as Tigers look to gauge themselves ahead of the main event.

Bangladesh will play another warm-up against India on June 1 before they gear up to take on Sri Lanka on June 8 in Dallas.

SHORT CORNER

T20 World Cup warm-ups: Aussies facing player shortage

Australia could have as few as eight players available for their T20 World Cup warm-up match against Namibia and may be forced to use support staff as substitute fielders. Australia captain has declared himself fit but who joins Marsh in Australia's XI for their warm-up fixture against Namibia in Trinidad on Tuesday remains to be seen, with a host of their stars not arriving in the West Indies until later in the week after they participated in Sunday's Indian Premier League final.

Sacked Xavi warns next Barca coach job 'won't be easy'

Xavi Hernandez signed off as Barcelona coach with a 2-1 win at Sevilla on Sunday to close out the La Liga season, before warning his replacement the job "won't be easy".

Euro 2024: Barca starlets Yamal, Cubarsi in Spain list

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente named Barcelona's teenage stars Lamine Yamal and Pau Cubarsi in a 29-man Euro 2024 squad list on Monday. De la Fuente must cut three players before June 7 for the tournament that kicks off in Germany on June 14.

FIFA, UEFA 'abused dominant position' on Super League: Spain court

FIFA and UEFA "abused their dominant position" and "prevented free competition" by opposing the creation of a European Super League, a Spanish court said Monday. The ruling echoed an earlier one by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) which ordered the two governing bodies "to halt anti-competitive behaviour".

**Read The Daily Star website for the full stories.

Records galore in Junior Swimming C'ship

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Kriya Shikka Protisthan (BKSP) students kept breaking records in the 36th Junior National Swimming Championships as they made six new records in different groups on the third day of the competition at Syed Nazrul Islam Swimming Complex yesterday.

Six new records yesterday meant the tally for new records set is now 14 in three days, with today being the final day of the competition.

The ones who set new records with improved timings are Fatiha Maisha (clocked 2:51.04 seconds in 200m backstroke in 13-14 group), Mohammad Tofayel (clocked 58.78 seconds in 100m butterfly in 18-20 group), Mohammad Toufiq (clocked 2:37.51 seconds in 200m individual medley in 11-12 group), Anny Akter (clocked 1:08.63 seconds in 100m freestyle in 18-20 group), Maisha Akter Mim (5:28.69 seconds in 400m freestyle in 13-14 group) and Mohammad Toufiq (clocked 28.05 seconds in 50m freestyle in 11-12 group).

Having bagged seven golds and one silver by setting two new records, Tofayel now dreams of becoming the best swimmer of the competition by taking part in two more events on the final day.

The lad from Kishorganj had earlier bagged nine gold medals in another age-level competition but failed to become the best swimmer.



Mohammad Tofayel

Anything but a title is not satisfactory: Djokovic

AFP, PARIS

Novak Djokovic said on Sunday he has "low expectations and high hopes" for the French Open after a turbulent season so far in which he has failed to win an ATP title.

The world number one will kick off his bid for a fourth Roland Garros crown and record-breaking 25th Grand Slam triumph when he takes on French wildcard Pierre-Hugues Herbert on Tuesday.

His win-loss record this year is a disappointing 14-6 and he is yet to reach a final.

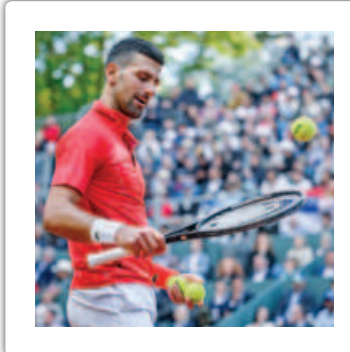
Djokovic arrives in Paris off the back of a shock semifinal loss at a low-key warm-up event in Geneva to Czech Tomas Machac, after which he said he was "worried" about his form.

"Low expectations and high hopes," Djokovic told reporters when asked how he felt heading into the tournament.

"I almost feel a bit embarrassed to say what my expectations are.

"Anything but a title for me is not satisfactory. So it always has been like that. I know it might sound arrogant to a lot of people, but I think I have the career that backs it up."

The last time Djokovic went into the French Open without a title in the calendar year, he was dumped out in the 2018 quarterfinals by unheralded Italian Marco Cecchinato.



When the Serbian star lifted his men's record 24th Slam at last year's US Open -- his third major title of 2023 -- it appeared as though he was set to dominate again this season.

But he is still waiting to break out of a tie with Margaret Court for the all-time record of Grand Slam titles after losing to eventual champion Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open semifinals.

"In a way, me playing still at this highest level, one of the major reasons is trying to write more history of the sport and win the biggest titles," Djokovic added.

"Paris is definitely one of them.

"So that's why my hopes and goals are always the same, but I have to lower the expectations.

"When I say that I mean, maybe not thinking too much ahead in terms of the tournament and who I might face in the later rounds, but really taking it day by day, step by step, and really building my game.

"Because that's what I have really been struggling with, not really playing in a consistently good level."

Djokovic has suffered several surprising defeats in recent months -- losing to then world number 123 Luca Nardi in Indian Wells and 32nd-ranked Chilean Alejandro Tabilo in Rome.

But none of the 37-year-old's rivals can match his experience of reaching the latter stages of Grand Slam events.

Bangladesh notch another solid win

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh continued their domination in the 4th Bangabandhu Cup International Kabaddi Tournament with a 73-22 points win over Malaysia in their Group A encounter at the Shaheed Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

On the back of a 67-22 points win over South Korea in the opening match, buoyant Bangladesh looked very aggressive from the outset and took an 11-0 lead against a side, who had on Sunday conceded a 67-30 points defeat at the hands of Nepal.

Raiders Arduzzaman Mumshi, Mizanur Rahman and Al Amin were unstoppable from the beginning while defenders Roman Hossain, Rasel Hasan and Sajedul Chaklader were rock solid to catch the opponents regularly.

Out of 73 points, Bangladesh bagged 53 from raids and defence while the rest came from bonuses and lonas.

Even though Malaysia had beaten South Korea 40-38 in the Hangzhou Asian Games last year and played well against Iran and Pakistan too, they could not repeat their improved performance against Bangladesh, who reduced them to all-out three times in each half.

The charges of Abdul Jalil went



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

for the break with a comfortable 37-4 points lead that prompted the coach to test his reserve bench. Malaysia took advantage and collected a few bonus points in the second half.

"Our initial target was to make sure of the victory. We started widening the winning margin after the victory was ensured," said man of the match Al

Amin. "We always respect opponents and consider them strong. So, we started the game aggressively with an aim to win the match because we want to be champions in the tournament for the fourth time."

Bangladesh will play their third group match against Indonesia on May 29.