

## Tigers reap rewards of planned attack

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh have been smart in picking the right bowler for the right moment so far in the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup and on Thursday against the Netherlands, when asked to defend a score for the first time in the tournament, the bowling unit flourished once more through the precise choice of bowlers according to situations.

Chasing a challenging but not improbable 160-run target, Netherlands were at one point running away with the game, needing 61 runs from 42 deliveries with seven wickets in hand.

After Taskin Ahmed had been hit for a humongous six in the 13th over, which went for 11 runs, the game was slipping.

Shakib Al Hasan, who had been a bit expensive in his first two overs, conceded just five in the 13th. That over raised the asking run-rate to 9.33, increasing the scoreboard pressure on the Dutch who had two set batters at the crease.

Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto then handed the ball to leg-spinner Rishad Hossain for the 15th over, hoping to purchase some wickets.

Holding back Rishad's last two overs for this particular phase worked wonders for Bangladesh as the scoreboard pressure and Rishad's sharp turn broke the game open.

Rishad courageously tossed up deliveries to get purchase and Sybrand Engelbrecht only managed to top-edge the ball to point to depart for 33 off 22. Just one ball later, another flighted



delivery saw Bas de Leede get stumped, beaten by the turn.

The two wickets allowed Shakib to bowl another five-run over, before Mustafizur Rahman's death bowling exhibition began.

Mustafizur, who bowled 17 dot balls

in the innings, found bite on the surface with his cutters but it was his clever use of angles that really made him almost unhittable.

During the recently-concluded IPL, Mustafizur had been seen using the angle to slant deliveries across right-handers with MS Dhoni standing wide behind the stump. His pace variations and his wide angled deliveries proved too good for the Dutch batters.

Mustafizur is seemingly feeling more confident in using his variations in the death overs, as 46 percent of his deliveries in the death overs have been slower cutters since 2022.

Mustafizur has the joint second-lowest economy-rate among bowlers who have played at least three games at this T20 World Cup and picked up a minimum of four wickets.

With an economy of 3.91, he stands with OEG Baartman (South Africa) and PA van Meekeren (Netherlands) but unlike them, Mustafizur bowls at the death overs.

On Thursday, he bowled the 17th and the 19th over of the game, giving away just four runs, compared to Meekeren, who bowled the 15th and 17th over for his side, conceding 11.

The game was opened up by Rishad but defended by Mustafizur. Shakib, who said Bangladesh's score of 159-5 was challenging, but not a winning one, talked about the bowling plan.

"I think everyone is contributing here, especially the whole bowling unit," Shakib

said when asked about Rishad's impact.

"Each of the bowlers are needed at different times in different situations. The way Mustafizur bowled and Taskin and Tanzim Sakib bowled with a new ball, naturally, these contributions are also needed to make another bowler bowl well," he added.

Almost hidden behind the marquee bowlers, part-time off-spinner Mahmudullah Riyad also played a crucial



role for Bangladesh, removing the dangerous left-hander Vikramjit Singh in his only over of the match.

Clear and concise, Bangladesh's bowling unit has been decisive in their plans so far, which has put the team on course for a berth in the Super Eight.

## Tigers brace for taxing Super Eight

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are in poll position to reach the Super Eight stage of the ICC T20 World Cup after their victory over the Netherlands on Thursday and are set to be placed in Group 1 in the next phase, arguably the toughest of the two groups.

The Tigers currently have four points in three matches, having beaten Sri Lanka earlier and then losing to South Africa. A victory or a washout against Nepal in their final group-stage match on June 17 will seal their spot in Super Eight.

Even if they get stunned by Nepal, they would still qualify if Sri Lanka beat the Netherlands, or if the bankers don't lose the match by a big margin or if the match gets washed out.

If Bangladesh get through, they will be in Group 1 alongside India, Australia and Afghanistan.

Although the group phase is not yet over, Bangladesh's group and opponents are already fixed owing to the ICC's pre-tournament seeding of Super Eight.

The top two ranked teams in each group in the first round were allotted the first and second seeding ahead of the tournament, meaning finishing first or second in the group will not make any difference.

Bangladesh were originally not part of the pre-tournament seeding as South Africa and Sri Lanka were given the first and second spot from group D.

As Sri Lanka have been knocked out and South Africa are already through, Bangladesh are now vying for Sri Lanka's vacant D2 slot.

Because of this pre-tournament seeding system, the Tigers will have to take on two tournament favourites and a dangerous Afghanistan side in the Super Eight while in the other group, two associate sides—the USA and Scotland—are vying for spots alongside the West Indies and South Africa.

If given the choice, the Tigers would've definitely preferred to take South Africa's place in Group 1, but with that not being a possibility, they have to begin bracing themselves for the uphill challenge in Super Eight.

The matches against Australia and India are scheduled to be played at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on June 21 and 22 respectively, a venue that has produced the two lowest aggregate scoring matches so far in the competition.

England decimated Oman in Antigua, bundled them out for a mere 47 and chased the total down in 3.1 overs while Australia skittled out Namibia for 72 and chased it down inside six overs.

It will be a challenge for the Bangladesh batters to withstand the Indian and Australian attacks in Antigua if sent to bat first. However, Bangladesh can also turn the tables on them with their bowling attack if they get the first crack with the ball.

Bangladesh will then face Afghanistan in Kingstown on June 24, the same venue where they beat the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands match, the pitch had something for the faster bowlers and some variable bounce early on but run-making was not that laborious afterwards.

Taking early wickets against Afghanistan, a team dependent on the top order, and tackling their lethal spin attack will be the key for the Tigers. The Caribbean conditions should aid Bangladesh, however, given their tough draw in the Super Eight, the path to semifinals looks treacherous for the Tigers.

## Moment of truth for defending champions Italy

AFP, Wuppertal

Italy kick off their European Championship title defence against Albania on Saturday as a new-look team tries to rebuild the reputation of one of the world's most important football nations.

Luciano Spalletti's Italy take on Albania in Dortmund in the first of three clashes in a fiendishly difficult Group B which also contains Spain and Croatia.

And those two later fixtures make Saturday's one hugely important, as with the four best third-place finishers in the six groups reaching the knockout stages, a win over Albania would give Italy a great chance of going through.

Italy come into the tournament in quietly confident mood, with delegation chief Gianluigi Buffon insisting that the Azzurri are "an underrated team" despite being holders and four-time World Cup winners.

Italy might be reigning champions but after winning the last Euros three years ago they missed out on qualification for a second straight World Cup.

Spalletti has been entrusted to guide his nation out of another bout of deep soul searching and he has done so by casting aside the team which became national heroes by beating England in the Euro 2020 final.

"I can see that we have players in the squad who will become future greats. They have the quality," Federico Chiesa said on Thursday in an interview with UEFA.

"We want to show what we're made of at the Euros. Let's see what we can do."

## Spain and Croatia brace for another battle

REUTERS, Dortmund

Spain and Croatia begin their Euro 2024 campaigns on Saturday with a rematch of last year's nervy UEFA Nations League final as they kick off the action in Group B, which also includes European champions Italy and surprise package Albania.

With memories of a heartbreaking shootout defeat by Spain still fresh in their minds, captain Luka Modric's perennial overachievers seem ready to again challenge the pre-tournament odds in their quest to finally win a major trophy.

After reaching the 2018 World Cup final and making the semifinals four years later, the Nations League final loss to Spain was a tough pill to swallow.

It also raised questions of how long the country's 'golden generation' can keep on writing one of the great underdog stories in recent history.

Yet Croatia go into the tournament still relying on a midfield trio of Modric (39), Marcelo Brozovic (31) and Mateo Kovacic (30), who gave a taste of their competitive hunger on Saturday when they handed Portugal a 2-1 defeat in Lisbon.

The result did not reflect the visitors' dominance against Roberto Martinez's side, who were subdued despite being almost at full strength

with Bruno Fernandes, Bernardo Silva, Vitinha and Ruben Dias in the starting 11.

The win gave Zlatko Dalic's side a boost for their Euro 2024 debut against old rivals Spain - one of the few elite teams giant-killers Croatia



have regularly failed to slain.

Spain are partly to blame for Croatia's failure to hit the same World Cup highs at the European Championship in which their best result has been reaching the quarterfinals twice.

"We played them many times and we know what kind of football Spain like to play, they like possession and

lulling the opposition to sleep," Croatia striker Ante Budimir told a press conference on Wednesday.

"They can be very quick and vertical at any time. As a team, they are nice to watch and easy to enjoy. (Midfielder) Rodri is very important for them. They have a lot of young players who can make a difference. A very talented and dangerous team..."

Since taking over the Spain job from Luis Enrique after the 2022 World Cup debacle, when they were knocked out in the last 16 on penalties by surprise package Morocco, manager Luis de la Fuente has been blending the country's young and ascending talent with experienced players very successfully.

Veteran defenders Dani Carvajal and Nacho, with Rodri in the middle and captain Alvaro Morata up front, provide the foundation and balance to allow Spain's skilled youngsters Lamine Yamal, Nico Williams and Pedri to create their magic.

Will that be enough to keep their winning run alive against gritty Croatia?

"We didn't come to Germany on vacation, on a tour trip, we are here to win and we'll do our best to do that," 16-year-old winger Yamal told reporters on Wednesday. "Saturday's game against Croatia is probably the most important of my career."

## Resurrected England eye another win

AGENCIES

England can't afford to drop any points against Namibia in their final Group B game of the ongoing T20 World Cup on Saturday at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua if they are to keep themselves alive in the Super 8 race.

The Jos Buttler-led side thrashed Oman in their last match on Thursday and will be full of confidence in getting the job done against Namibia but they can't relax or be complacent.

Even though a defeat against ICC associates member Namibia - nine places below fourth-placed England in T20I rankings - looks a bit unlikely, Buttler's men will be wary of their opponents as a loss in today's game will mean an automatic exit for the defending champions.

After a no-result in their opening match against Scotland and a heavy defeat to Australia in the second game, England found themselves in a 'must-win by a big margin' situation against minnows Oman.



Fortunately for the Three Lions, Adil Rashid (4/11), Jofra Archer (3/12) and Mark Wood (3/12) stepped up in a big way, sharing the wickets to bowl their opponents out for 47 runs in only 13.2 overs before Buttler scored a quickfire 24 off eight balls to lead the side to victory in just 3.1

overs, giving their net run rate a massive boost from -1.800 to +3.081, significantly above Scotland's -2.164.

A victory this weekend for England will see them draw level on five points with the Scots, who face Australia on Sunday. As long as England don't slip against Namibia and Australia do what is expected of them - which is to beat Scotland - England can hope for smooth sailing to the Super Eight.

What would also come as a relief to Buttler and Co is that Australia skipper Pat Cummins ruled out Thursday the prospect of Australia underperforming against Scotland in a bid to oust rivals England from the Twenty20 World Cup, saying it would be against the "spirit of cricket."

"I don't think you can (go into a game not trying to win) - ever," Cummins said after Josh Hazlewood caused controversy this week when he said it would be in Australia's interests for reigning champions England to be out of the competition.



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