

A defeatist mentality, leading nowhere

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

It was a day to seize an opportunity, perhaps the biggest one in Bangladesh's recent history. After their solid effort with the ball against Afghanistan in St. Vincent yesterday, the context and match scenario all pointed to going on an all-out attack in chasing 115. It simply required taking those runs in 12.1 overs to make the T20 World Cup semifinals or fall trying. A defeatist mentality, however, surprisingly turned the whole game away from their grasp.

What was an inspiring challenge and opportunity would leave a big gash on Bangladesh's cricket history as, given the context of Group One of the Super Eights and the game itself, the only thing at stake was having the heart to go for the game for a place in the semis; for winning in itself was not as important, akin to making it a dead rubber final appearance in the marquee event.

But could more be expected when the head coach Chandika Hathurusingha remarked that anything gained from the Super Eights will be a "bonus", or when Shakib Al Hasan jumped to conclusion that they do not have a chance of making the last four stage anymore following defeat to India?

While it boiled down to a make-or-break situation for the Tigers at the Arnos



Vale Stadium, Mahmudullah Riyad played out five dots when the equation was to get 43 off 19 deliveries. It really showed where the confidence level of the batting unit was, given how Bangladesh planned for the chase. Did the Bangladesh think tank not know what kind of game they ought to be preparing for?

Even before the game against Afghanistan, Bangladesh knew they needed a 62-run win if they batted first. Thus, they had to be aware that they needed to chase any target in and around 11 to 13 overs. But skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said something about winning being the initial plan; as if the equation at hand was an irrelevant burden.

Most importantly, in a game where the batting order had to be shuffled to make the chase in 12.1 overs, Bangladesh

resorted to normalcy.

"First of all, we wanted to win the match. That is the initial plan. After the first innings, when we saw 115 on the board, we had a plan that we could win in 12.1 overs," Shanto relayed at yesterday's press conference.

He stated more clearly during the post-match presentations the approach the batting unit carried. "The normal plan was first three wickets we go hard, especially in the first six overs, and if we lose early wickets we play normally," Shanto had said.

Afghanistan, on the other hand, played out of their skin while Bangladesh were humbled by their own abysmal planning. If the idea was to attack in the Powerplay, the first six overs, Bangladesh did the opposite by not taking risks and sending

in the likes of Tawhid Hridoy or Soumya Sarkar earlier – batters who are ready to take advantage of field settings.

Instead, Shanto and Shakib Al Hasan, who have struggled immensely throughout this tournament, came in and departed in back-to-back deliveries, leaving them at 23 for 3 in 2.5 overs. With their plans, Bangladesh looked to be heading neither here nor there.

The Powerplay produced 46 for three and after that, Liton tried for a while, and Hridoy was the only other batter who looked like he wanted something different inside the 12.1 overs. Once the latter departed, along came that pivotal 10th over where veteran Mahmudullah picked up just four off Noor Ahmed – the epitome of Bangladesh's defeatist mentality – and they lost the plot from there. Liton at one point stuck to the norm to at least ensure a win, but Afghanistan seized momentum from what intent Bangladesh had lost by not getting more in the Powerplay.

There was no qualification at stake to another tournament, as was the case during the last game Bangladesh played in the 2023 ODI World Cup against Sri Lanka. Only winning would bring nothing of importance. Shanto said that "the whole batting line-up made very bad decisions", but bad decisions started from the very top with the team management, Hathurusingha and Co.

Argentina and Chile set to renew rivalry

REUTERS

Argentina and Chile will write a new chapter in their long-standing rivalry on Tuesday's Copa America Group A clash at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, the same stage where "La Roja" thwarted the reigning world champions in the continental final in 2016.

Argentina boss Lionel Scaloni said that his side has put behind them the painful memory of the second successive Copa final they lost to their bitter rivals, which followed a 2015 final loss in Santiago.



In both cases, Lionel Messi's Argentina lost to Chile on penalties.

"Nothing is left of the 2016 final. Just as we are world champions, what I said the other day, that's over and football is like this," Scaloni told reporters on Monday.

"It goes on, the wheel goes on, the ball doesn't stop and there's absolutely nothing left. Everything else is history, it doesn't make much sense to go back."

Argentine-born Chile coach Ricardo Gareca, appointed earlier this year, has said it is always special for him to face his home country, who beat Brazil in the last Copa America final, in Rio in 2021.

The 66-year-old will be looking for his first win against the defending champions, having recorded two draws and two defeats at the helm of Peru in South American qualifiers between 2015 and 2022.

"It's always special to face Argentina, it's not just any national team," he said. "Beyond the importance of Argentina on its own, of what it represents, for me logically it is always special, these are not common clashes."

"I live it intensely, of course, totally focused on the Chile national team, but they are special matches."

Group A leaders Argentina can clinch a spot in the quarter-finals after their 2-0 win over Canada in their opening match. Chile have one point after a goalless draw against Peru.



Romelu Lukaku has put the ball at the back of the net three times during the first two games for Belgium in the Euro 2024 but none of those efforts stood. The all-time top-scorer for the Red Devils will need to get his act together as Belgium face a survival clash against Ukraine tonight. PHOTO: AFP

Hazlewood doubts 'drastic' changes for Australia

AFP, Gros-Islet

Fast bowler Josh Hazlewood believes there is no "drastic" need to cull Australia's ageing squad despite the failure to make the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup.

Australia's 24-run loss to India on Monday pushed them to the brink of elimination from the last four chase before Afghanistan's dramatic victory against Bangladesh nudged them over the cliff.

By the time the next World Cup rolls around in India and Sri Lanka in 2026, only one of the current 15-man squad – Cameron Green – will still be well under 30.

Green, a 24-year-old all-rounder, didn't get to play a game.

"There might be a couple of changes, but a lot of the guys still play in the franchise cricket if they're not playing for Australia, so they're available to be picked," said Hazlewood, himself 33.

"There's some class players in our 15. And we've got a couple on the bench as well. So, you'd think it'd be an actual slow change. I don't think there'd be anything drastic."

What does need drastic attention is Australia's woeful performance in the field at the tournament.

Afghanistan win, so does cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

'Seriously, who writes these scripts!'

Pommie Mbangwa, a Zimbabwean commentator, said this line twice on air yesterday during the final Super Eight match of the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup between Afghanistan and Bangladesh in St. Vincent.

On both occasions, he said this after Afghanistan, while trying to defend a paltry 115, had claimed a wicket at the right time to halt Bangladesh's progress, a match that they eventually won and booked a spot for the semifinals for the very first time.

Mbangwa's genuine reaction at Afghanistan's never-say-die attitude could also be used to describe this team's incredible journey in cricket, which separates it from every other nation that has ever played the game at the highest level.

For a country like Afghanistan, which has been ravaged by wars for decades and is treated as an outcast by most of the world, mere participating in a World Cup should be hailed as an achievement.

Afghanistan, a team first formed with players who learnt the game in refugee camps in Pakistan, could also be referred to as cricket's only refugee team, as they have never played an international game at home and are unlikely to do so in the near future.

Given the lack of infrastructure at home, never getting to experience true home support and having no real cricketing heritage, Afghanistan have no business contesting against top sides in ICC events, let alone beating them.

But Rashid Khan and his team didn't get that memo.

Even with Afghanistan's lethal spin attack, hardly anyone hedged their bets on Afghanistan making it to the semifinals. The reason for that, perhaps, was their poor



record in T20 World Cups.

They have featured in every T20 World Cup since the third edition in 2010 but before the ongoing tournament, had only one win over a top side, which came against West Indies in 2016.

This time, the Afghans were pitted in the group of death in the first round, alongside New Zealand, West Indies, Papua New Guinea and Uganda, with only two teams set to move onto the Super Eight.

The Afghans first showed signs that this edition will be different when they crushed the Kiwis by 84 runs, a victory that booked them a place in the next phase.

Afghanistan's challenge got even tougher in the Super Eight, when they got pitted against two tournament favourites in India and Australia along with Bangladesh in Group I.

A 47-run defeat against India didn't

do their qualification chances any favour. However, after Rashid's team sprung a surprise on Australia and India aided the South Asian neighbours with a win over the Aussies, Afghanistan needed just one more win against the Tigers to reach the promised land, which they did.

Afghanistan's incredible rise has been international cricket's biggest feel good story for some years now. Their triumph came on the backs of players like Rashid, Mohammad Nabi, Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Co, all of whom could've easily abandoned the national side and played exclusively in franchise cricket. But this Afghan team has long been on a mission, to bring smiles to their countrymen who don't have much to celebrate. This determination has brought this side into the semis and two matches away from the coveted trophy.

Modric wants to carry on

REUTERS, Leipzig

Croatia captain Luka Modric said he would look to continue playing on despite his country's likely elimination from the European Championship after conceding a last-gasp goal in a 1-1 draw with Italy in their final Group B game on Monday.

Modric suggested he wanted to carry on even after 178 internationals since his debut in 2006.

"I'd like to keep playing forever but there probably will come a time when I must hang up my boots. I'll keep playing on, but I don't know for how much longer," the 38-year-old midfielder told reporters.

Modric was resigned in his analysis of the game.

"That was very stressful. We kept battling right until the end but, unfortunately, football was merciless with us tonight. It was cruel above all today but also in our last match (a 2-2 draw with Albania) when we also conceded a late goal," said Modric.



Italy forward Mattia Zaccagni celebrates scoring a last-ditch equaliser against Croatia which took the defending champions to the Round of 16 of Euro 2024 in their last Group B match at the Leipzig Stadium on Monday. (Inset) Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma consoles Luka Modric after the result all but ensured Croatia's exit. PHOTO: REUTERS

Spalletti unhappy with leaks and talk of pacts

REUTERS, Leipzig

For Italy's media, the 1-1 draw with Croatia on Monday which sent them through to the last 16 of Euro 2024 was a miracle, but despite the euphoria of a late equaliser, manager Luciano Spalletti appeared far from happy.

The defending champions were 1-0 down going into the final minute of added time before substitute Mattia Zaccagni's goal salvaged a draw.

At Spalletti's post-match press conference he responded angrily to one reporter asking if his 3-5-2 formation was the result of a pact with his players.

"In my opinion, this is what you were told," Spalletti said, before asking the reporter his age.

"Fifty-one, you still have 14 years before you get to 65 like me. I speak to the players, I need to hear with their ears and see with their eyes, so I talk to them, what is the problem?"

At the reporter's insistence that nobody had told him about a pact, Spalletti repeated his idea that someone had spoken out of turn.

"But don't claim that this is your poetic licence, this is just a weakness of those who leak things," Spalletti said.

"There is an internal environment and an external one and if in the internal environment there are those

who speak of certain things outside, it's someone who harms the national team. "I did my thesis at Coverciano on the 3-5-2. I'll let you see it later, so it's only natural that I speak to the players."

Italy came into the game with Croatia knowing a draw would guarantee a place in the last 16, and despite leaving it so late to secure qualification, fear is not something which concerns Spalletti.

"What kind of question is it, what if we get knocked out? Am I afraid? What am I afraid of? Otherwise I would have just come here like you guys and watched the games," Spalletti said. "I would have done another job. I know so many people they would have given me a free ticket. It's only natural that there's pressure and responsibility, but we go out there to play."

La Gazzetta dello Sport went with the headline "Italian Miracle", and said the Azzurri were saved not only by Zaccagni's moment of magic but also keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma's fine saves.

La Stampa went with the same headline, and called Zaccagni "an accidental hero of a bad game", while La Repubblica said the "Azzurri reached the last 16 by the skin of their teeth".

Italy face Switzerland in the last 16 on Saturday.