

Markram feels 'no pressure' on WTC final chances

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

South Africa's stand-in skipper Aiden Markram is excited by their chances of qualifying for the final of the ICC World Test Championship 2023-25, but feels his side need to take it one game at a time.

The Proteas are currently fifth in the nine-team competition with a point percentage (PCT) of 47.62 after beating Bangladesh in the first Test by seven wickets in Mirpur last week.

South Africa have five games left in the ongoing cycle – the second Test against Bangladesh in Chattogram and a couple of two-Test series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan on home soil.

If they defeat the Tigers and then clean sweep Pakistan and Sri Lanka at home, they would end up with a PCT of 69.44, which is better than the current table leaders India's PCT of 62.82.

Even though the outcomes of other series will also come into play, if South Africa win their next five Tests, chances of them playing the final for the very first time is quite high.



In-form Tajjul Islam will look to lead Bangladesh's spin attack once again to stage a comeback in the second Test of the two-match series against South Africa, starting today at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram. However, the Tigers will hope that their batters, including Liton Das, have left their current form in Dhaka where they dished out dismal displays in the first Test.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Tigers pursue revival at unforgiving ZACS



SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN FROM CHATTOGRAM

Bangladesh will look to bounce back in Chattogram during the series concluding second Test against South Africa, scheduled to start today, in an attempt to avoid a series defeat against a SENA country on home soil after 14 years.

After losing the series opener by seven wickets within the fourth day in Dhaka, the Tigers find themselves under serious pressure, and their abysmal track record at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium (ZACS) in recent years leaves little room for optimism.



drawing seven.

The pressure on the Tigers stems not only from their poor batting performance following the successful Pakistan Tests but also from off-field issues. The latest emerged when captain Najmul Hossain Shanto expressed a desire to step down from the role after this series.

Shanto, who had an extended batting practice session in the nets amid scorching heat and humid conditions yesterday, seemingly skipped the pre-match press conference intentionally, prompting team management to send left-arm spinner Tajjul Islam in his place.

Tajjul, who earlier had a playful practice session with spin coach Mushtaq Ahmed – the latter seen batting against Tajjul and uncapped Hasan Murad at the nets – was made uncomfortable by a barrage of questions about Shanto's stance.

Initially, Tajjul avoided commenting on the issue, saying he was unaware of it. Later, however, he admitted that some players may face problems with off-field

issues cropping up right before a match – a quite regular occurrence in Bangladesh cricket over the past year or so.

The left-arm spinner, who crossed 200 Test wickets milestone with eight scalps in the preceding fixture, also addressed that the batters are failing to meet expectations, stressing on the need to convert the starts into big scores and build partnerships.

"To be honest, we are not performing as a unit... Everyone is working hard and trying their heart and soul. But nothing is happening," he said, adding that the team management might field an extra bowler, given the hot weather and expected flat pitch in store.

However, after wicketkeeper-batter Jaker Ali Anik was ruled out of this Test following a concussion sustained during Sunday's training, the team management may field an extra pacer alongside Hasan Mahmud. Bangladesh are also likely to go with a three-pronged spin attack, featuring Tajjul, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, and local boy Nayeem Hasan.

Meanwhile, South Africa are a much-relieved team after ending their decade-long drought of Test wins in the subcontinent. Yet the weather is a concern for them, noted stand-in skipper Aiden Markram, requiring the Proteas to "start from zero" in this contest.

"From a weather point of view, there isn't too much we can do besides hydrating well and making sure to keep our bodies in the healthiest way," Markram said.

"... It's a brand new game... We place emphasis on that, and when we do, not just here but anywhere in the world, we can start on the front foot," he concluded.

Final is a 50-50 game, says Tohura

SPORTS REPORTER

Prior to Bangladesh team's departure for Nepal for the SAFF Women's Championship, there was much hullabaloo over the absence of self-exiled forward Sirat Jahan Swapna, who had made a tremendous contribution to the team's regional title with four goals in 2022.

As replacement for Swapna, the names of younger forwards like Mosammat Sagorika, Shamsunnahar Jr and Saurav Akanda Prityoften emerged while Tohura Khatun hardly grabbed any headlines due to her injury.

But come the 2024 SAFF Women's Championship, the diminutive forward from Kalsindur has hogged all the spotlight with five goals against India and Bhutan and earning player of the match award in both matches as Bangladesh stormed into their second successive final.



With Tohura on fire, the countrymen will be expecting a repeat of her brilliance in the final against Nepal to deliver the back-to-back titles to the country.

"I think the two best sides have come into the final and it will be a 50-50 game. Nepal are a strong opponent and the team that will take their chances will come out victorious. We will give our 100 percent in the final," Tohura told The Daily Star over phone from Kathmandu yesterday.

Out of the five goals, Tohura scored three from outside the box – all left-footed wonders – while the other two were clever finishes from inside the box.

"I actually learnt goal-scoring skill with continued practice. Every player has contribution behind my goals because it is not possible to score five goals in two matches without the support. I think we have been playing good football as a team and my goals are outcomes of the team's overall hard work," said Tohura, whose last goal prior to the current campaign was in a friendly fixture against Singapore in December, 2023.

Tohura has been quite consistent in domestic competition as well, scoring 33 goals in 28 matches of Bangladesh Women's League in the last three seasons. She has many goals in age-group international tournaments as well.

Under the guidance of Peter Butler, the women in red and green have been playing high-line defense and aggressive football by building up attack from both flanks. The players never looked satisfied with a one-goal or a two-goal lead. Instead, they kept pressing, resulting in big wins against India and Bhutan.

Asked to compare between the 2022 and the 2024 squads, Tohura, who had scored one goal in the last campaign, said, "The squad of 2022 was strong because as that team became champions. The current one is a good side too and playing well. I will call it a strong team once we become champions."

Sylhet off the mark, Dhaka on top

SPORTS REPORTER

Sylhet Division cruised to a six-wicket win over Chattogram Division, while defending champions Dhaka Division gained the upper hand against Rangpur Division on the third day of the National Cricket League (NCL) fixtures yesterday.

Resuming the day at 130 for two in their second innings and needing 90 runs to win, Sylhet – who started their campaign with a draw against Dhaka – coasted to victory in 18.1 overs, with Pinak Ghosh (62 not out) guiding the chase at the Sylhet International Stadium Academy Ground.

Meanwhile, Dhaka achieved a handy 74-run lead over Rangpur after being all out for 327 in 90.3 overs at Savar's BKSP Ground-3, courtesy of a 204-run stand between Ashikur Rahman Shibli and Joyraj Sheikh.

Opener Shibli struck his maiden first-class century, a 129-run knock off 186 deliveries, laced with 10 fours and five sixes, before becoming leg-spinner Rishad Hossain's only scalp. Joyraj, on the other hand, fell for 87 before Mukidul Mugdho cleaned up the tail to end with three for 48. At stumps, Rangpur reached 28 for two in 14 overs.

Elsewhere, at Khulna's Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium, Khulna Division declared on 408 for nine against Barishal Division, featuring Anamul Haque Bijoy's 95. Tanvir Islam was Barishal's standout bowler, bagging four wickets for 124 runs.

Barishal, in reply, reached 28 without loss as the four-day encounter gears towards a draw after the opening day saw no play and only 34.2 overs were possible on day two.



Ashikur Rahman Shibli

'We try not to focus too much on history'

Former South Africa captain Ashwell Prince is currently working as the batting coach of his country. The 47-year-old had previously worked with Bangladesh as a batting consultant from August 2021 to February 2022, but resigned from his position with nine months still left on his contract. On Monday, before South Africa's final training session in Chattogram ahead of their second Test against hosts Bangladesh, Prince talked to The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): This South Africa side is relatively younger to the ones that have toured Bangladesh before. How do you see their growth as a unit?

Ashwell Prince (AP): It's a young team in terms of Test cricket. But if you look at the experience they have as cricketers, they aren't that young. They haven't toured the sub-continent a lot and they haven't been to Bangladesh before. But they have been around first-class and professional cricket for a long time. We try to use all of that experience and plug it into the situation we are facing.

DS: On a hostile wicket in Mirpur, your batting unit performed brilliantly in the first Test, which helped your side win their first Test in Asia in 10 years. How satisfied are you with their performance?

AP: There are a few factors that we are encouraged about. Kyle Verreynne played really well and scored his second Test hundred. [Wian] Mulder played really well, scoring his highest Test score. Obviously, at some stages of the innings, we were under pressure. But the way the guys reacted under pressure, that's really encouraging.

DS: How did you prepare the batters for this series, where you would play two Tests on two very different surfaces in Dhaka and Chattogram.

AP: The preparation was very much the same. The guys focused on their strengths, they focused on how to score runs rather than to survive. We knew that Mirpur will be a certain challenge. Having said that, every batting innings starts on zero for every individual. When you start your innings, you have to assess the condition and see what you are able



to do in those particular conditions. So, we try not to focus too much on history.

DS: South Africa are currently fifth in the World Test Championship standings. How do you view your chances of playing the final?

AP: Obviously, winning a Test match had a positive effect on our position. We moved

up a few places. But then New Zealand won [against India] and they went ahead of us again. So, that will always change as long as the matches keep happening. But from our point of view, we want to keep ourselves in a position where it is in our hands. We don't want to be dependent on others.

DS: Kyle Verreynne and some others used sweeps and reverse-sweeps to good effect in the first Test. Is that part of South Africa's strategy to counter the Bangladesh spinners?

AP: When you are going to the middle, you have to express your skillset. And if it means using sweeps and reverse-sweeps, it's not as if they are doing it because they have no other options. Those are the things that they are good at and we try to encourage the batsmen to play to their strengths.

DS: What are your thoughts on their [Bangladesh] recent struggles?

AP: I think it's a little bit harsh to say they are struggling. They have just come from a tour in Pakistan where they were successful. Batting is hard, I think people need to understand that. Sometimes fans want massive performances every game. It's not always possible. From our point of view, we respect the Bangladesh team and their batting lineup. We have prepared for them to play well, and hopefully we can play a little bit better.



Man Utd sack Ten Hag

AFP, London

Manchester United sacked manager Erik ten Hag on Monday after a disastrous start to the season with former Red Devils striker Ruud van Nistelrooy named interim boss.

United dropped to a lowly 14th in the table after suffering their fourth defeat in nine league games at West Ham on Sunday and have won only one of their last eight games in all competitions.

They are also 21st of 36 teams in the Europa League table, having drawn their three opening fixtures.

"Erik ten Hag has left his role as Manchester United men's first-team manager," said a club statement.

"Erik was appointed in April 2022 and led the club to two domestic trophies, winning the Carabao (League) Cup in 2023 and the FA Cup in 2024.

"We are grateful to Erik for everything he has done during his time with us and wish him well for the future."