

Afif returns as selection musical chairs spin on

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh have a few notable absentees for the white-ball tour of the West Indies, and with the squad announced yesterday, it was Afif Hossain's turn again to have a go at the national team spot that is akin to a musical chair.

A poor run of scores leading up to this year's T20 World Cup had seen the left-handed batter's place as a reserve player come under fire. What performance does he bring to the team after a gap of over one year?

In terms of his latest performances, there is not much to write home about. A poor run of scores in the Asia Cup had, sort of, sealed his fate, and a lone ODI appearance in New Zealand was the last time he played for the Tigers.

Afif appeared in Australia's Top End T20 tournament for Bangladesh HP in August this year, scoring just 73 runs in seven matches at an average of just over 10. His last 12 matches for the national team, played over a course of two years, have seen him score just 119 runs at an average of 11.90.



SQUAD: Mehedi Hasan Miraz (Captain), Liton Das, Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Soumya Sarkar, Parvez Hossain Emon, Mahmudullah Riyad, Jaker Ali, Afif Hossain, Rishad Hossain, Nasum Ahmed, Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Shoriful Islam, Tanzim Hasan Sakib and Nahid Rana.

ITINERARY

Dec 08: First ODI, St Kitts
Dec 10: Second ODI, St Kitts
Dec 12: Third ODI, St Kitts

What could the selectors base his selection on? It perhaps was the Dhaka Premier League in March-May, which preceded Afif's stint with BCB HP. In 13 games, he struck 277 runs at an average of just over 46.

However, Afif's recent performances do not justify a selection, even if he has been in Bangladesh Cricket Board's radar. It once again exposes the shortcomings of the board as they circle through names that have gone before. It did not take a

performance to get into the national side. Injured absentees, such as Towhid Hridoy, Najmul Hossain Shanto, and veteran Mushfiqur Rahim, were enough for Afif to get the call up.

Afif's role too had often appeared to be unsuitable for his capabilities. Reliant on timing and placement, he had been pushed into number seven, even as he never merited the tag of a slogger. Which role he returns to will only be clarified when the upcoming series is played, but

squad selection carousel was once again apparent simply because of the lack of options available.

This inclusion also comes when he failed to reach double figures seven times in his last 11 ODI matches. If Afif really was seeking to bat higher up the order, the team management did not avail it. This time, with a dearth of regular batters from the top and middle order, Afif could very well be seen coming higher up the order.

Into his sixth year of international cricket, Afif has shown his talent only sporadically. When the country's cricket pipeline does not produce batters for different roles, the likes of Afif are the ones coming and going out of the side, often used as a stopgap measure.

Batting disasters were already evident during the ongoing Tests in the West Indies. Opener Zakir Hasan was dropped from the series, while Parvez Hossain Emon was called up after a few essential knocks. Without clarity in their roles, they too could prove to be part of the infamous musical chairs as selection shuffle continues.

Fed Cup starts today in new format

SPORTS REPORTER

The curtain on the Federation Cup is set to rise today with a slightly different format as franchise T20 cricket has been followed in knockout rounds to give an edge to the favourites of the tournament.

On the opening day, defending champions Bashundhara Kings will take on Brothers Union at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla while Bangladesh Police FC will square off against Fortis FC at the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium in Mymensingh.

Federation Cup used to feature three or four groups before the knockout stage rounds, featuring quarterfinals, semifinals and the final.

This time, though, 10 participating have been teams split into two groups and the top two teams from each group will enter into the four-team knockout stage, a format styled after franchise cricket tournaments, with two qualifiers and an eliminator deciding the finalists.

"I don't see any benefit of this format, and I think it has been introduced to bring a hype. Besides, this format will give edge to the favourites. If they somehow slip in the knockout stage, they will get another chance to make up," Chittagong Abahani coach Saifur Rahman Moni opined.

Moni, a former national team forward who was recently elected as a member of Bangladesh Football Federation, believes the title race will be between Bashundhara Kings and Mohammedan even though the long duration of the tournament will give other teams opportunity to recover from injury issues.

The participating teams will also get an opportunity to replace poor-performing players before the knockout stage, which will start after the midseason transfer window.

Joty and Co upbeat over direct World Cup berth

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

"Our ODI team look very strong," claimed Bangladesh opener Fargana Hoque, who was adjudged player of the series, after her side's comprehensive seven-wicket victory against Ireland in the third and final Women's ODI in Mirpur yesterday.

There was hardly any doubt that the Tigresses have evolved in the series, whitewashing the visitors on their way to brightening their chance for direct qualification in next year's ICC Women's World Cup in India.

Showcasing a spirited display, Nigar Sultana Joty's team put aside all the pre-series fears. There had been doubt over whether the home side – who had lost all three ODIs they had played before, against Australia in March – would be able to get the maximum six points against a side that came here with triumphs over England and Sri Lanka.

However, a much-improved batting performance saw them clinch a second clean sweep in a three-match WODI series since Zimbabwe 2021 in Bulawayo. Opener Fargana and No. 3 batter Sharmin Akhter Supta, who made 172 and 211 runs in the series, respectively, made a strong statement.

"We always talk about our batting. So far in the series, I think they have been doing well, and our top order is also getting runs. Bowlers have also done well, so it was a wonderful series," said Joty during a post-match presentation.

With India having already gained direct entry by virtue of being hosts, and

● Tigresses' 3-0 whitewash over Ireland boosted their chances of direct qualification for next year's ICC Women's World Cup.

● The clean sweep also has propelled Bangladesh to seventh place in the ICC Women's Championship 2022-25 (IWC) standings – trailing Sri Lanka (22 points) by three points and New Zealand (20 points) by just one – reigniting their hopes of direct qualification to the mega event as one of the top five teams other than hosts India after Australia, England and South Africa secured their entry.

● With 143-run partnership, Sharmin Akhter and Fargana Hoque set a new record for Bangladesh in Women's ODIs for any wicket, eclipsing the 127-run stand between Rumana Ahmed and Sharmin against South Africa in 2017.

● The two teams will play three-match T20I series in Sylhet, starting from December 5.



Australia, England, and South Africa already booking their places from the IWC points table, Bangladesh will now have to fight against three teams – Sri Lanka, New Zealand and West Indies – in order to be one of the last two teams to make direct qualification for the 50-over event.

"See, we had a very good series. We

want to carry it forward to the West Indies series as well. We don't want to play the qualifier to play the ODI World Cup. Each and every one wants to play the World Cup directly," said a confident Joty.

"Of course, we are hopeful," Fargana also echoed the sentiment of her captain.

'Sadia had a lot to give to the nation'

SPORTS REPORTER

Acclaimed shooter Sharmin Akter Ratna was left shocked and dismayed on hearing the news of the fellow shooter Syeda Sadia Sultana, with whom she had forged a successful partnership at domestic and international circuit.

Sadia passed away in Chattogram yesterday at 31 years of age after battling mental issues for years.

"It's sad that such a promising career has been cut short," Bangladesh Shooting Sports Federation's joint secretary Mushtaque Waiz told The Daily Star yesterday evening, confirming that the successful shooter had taken her own life earlier in the morning.

"She was mentally ill for long and did not have contact with anyone outside her family. The federation, though, and the shooters, too, had helped her financially several times," Mushtaque added.

The last time Said had represented the country on the international stage was in 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, but it was the 2010 South Asian Games in Dhaka and the Commonwealth Shooting Championship in New Delhi later that year that earned Sadia fame in the shooting circuit. Sadia had won gold in the women's team event of 10m air rifle in those two competitions, partnership Ratna.

"I wasn't ready to hear the news about the untimely death of Sadia, with whom I won a few gold medals – a feat that has not been matched by any other female shooters in the country till now," Ratna, another working as a coach at the BSSF, told The Daily Star.

Battling depression for long, Sadia had remained away from public eye for majority of the last decade. However, she returned to headlines back in 2017 after suffering severe burn injuries from a fire at her home in Chattogram.

Ratna lamented the untimely departure of the shooter, who she feels could have given much more to the nation.

"It is a matter of great regret that she departed this world at the age of only 31. I believe she had a lot to give to the nation and to the sport if we could have kept her in the shooting fraternity," Ratna said.

Tragedy hits Guinea

AGENCIES

A deadly stampede at a football match killed at least 56 people in Guinea's second city N'Zerekore, the junta-controlled government said yesterday.

The events at Sunday's match – a tournament's final organised in honour of Guinea's junta leader, Mamady Doumbouya, who seized power in a 2021 coup and has installed himself as president – were initially reported as clashes between fans, triggered after a player was sent off.

"Protests of dissatisfaction with refereeing decisions led to stone-throwing by supporters, resulting in fatal stampedes," said a government statement.

Slot's Liverpool flip script on City

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool have been used to second best during Pep Guardiola's era at Manchester City, but a 2-0 victory over the crisis-hit champions left little doubt over who are the team to beat in this season's Premier League title race.

Goals in either half from Cody Gakpo and Mohamed Salah at Anfield on Sunday did not do justice to the scale of the Reds' domination as City succumbed to a sixth defeat in a seven-game winless run.

Arsenal and Chelsea are now Liverpool's closest challengers, nine points behind, with City 11 back and almost certain to finally lose their grip on the English top flight after an unprecedented four consecutive titles and six in the past seven seasons.

Guardiola reminded the Anfield crowd of that fact by raising six fingers when taunted with chants of "sacked in the morning".

The Catalan's defiance, though, could not mask the fact that City have rested on their laurels, while Liverpool have stepped up a level under Arne Slot.

Slot appeared to have the



impossible job of succeeding the much-loved Jurgen Klopp.

The charismatic German brought Liverpool back to the top of English and European football. His title triumph in 2019/2020 was the club's first for 30 years and the only blot on City's dominance in recent times.

In contrast to Alex Ferguson's departure from Manchester United and Arsene Wenger's exit at Arsenal, Liverpool have turned a legendary figure leaving into a positive.

Klopp did much of the groundwork himself, rejuvenating

the squad over his final 18 months in charge with the signings of Gakpo, Alexis Mac Allister, Dominik Szoboszlai and Ryan Gravenberch.

Slot's only summer signing, Federico Chiesa, has barely featured due to injury.

But the injection of fresh blood, mixed with the experience of title winners in the prolific Salah, captain Virgil van Dijk, Andy Robertson and Trent Alexander-Arnold has proved a winning combination.

Slot has been keen to give Klopp's legacy credit, but the Dutchman deserves his due for the small details that have produced a run of 18 wins from his first 20 games in all competitions.

Robertson and Alexander-Arnold's narrower positions have left Liverpool less vulnerable in transition and contributed to them having the best defensive record in the league.

Gravenberch has shone since being transformed into a holding midfielder, while Gakpo is finally delivering on his potential under his

compatriot.

Slot has also managed to keep Liverpool's momentum rolling despite constant speculation over the futures of Salah, Van Dijk and Alexander-Arnold, all of whom are due out of contract at the end of the season.

It is not just the Premier League that Slot has so far bent to his will. Liverpool are also top of the Champions League with a perfect record from five games, including a memorable 2-0 win over Real Madrid on Wednesday.

Victory over City capped a dream week, but the former Feyenoord boss was still keen to use the English and European champions as the benchmark for his side's aspirations. "Playing against Real Madrid, against Manchester City, teams that are so good and have won so many trophies, coming out and winning against them... We're really happy with these two wins but we also understand we want to achieve more than this," Slot said.

December may only be a day old, but already it is hard to see beyond Liverpool matching Manchester United's record tally for 20 English top-flight titles come May.



Argentina's Juan Martin del Potro poses with Novak Djokovic and compatriot Gabriela Sabatini during his emotional farewell exhibition match in Buenos Aires yesterday. The two-time Olympic medallist defeated Djokovic 6-4, 7-5 in his final outing, marking the end of a career marred by injuries but celebrated for its achievements – including being one of only three players, alongside Djokovic and the recently retired Rafael Nadal, to have defeated Roger Federer in a Grand Slam final.

PHOTO: REUTERS