

A never-seen-before Saif emerges

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN *from Sylhet*

Rangpur Riders' top-order batter Saif Hassan may finally be getting into the T20 groove following a good run of form in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League.

Saif, who represented Bangladesh in a few Tests and T20Is in 2020-21, did not enjoy much success in the build-up to the tournament as he scored 41 runs in three matches in the Global Super League in Guyana for Rangpur Riders before managing only 47 runs in seven innings for Dhaka Division in the National Cricket League T20 in Sylhet.

However, since the start of the BPL, the 26-year-old has been in superb touch as he has already scored two half-centuries in four innings, including a swashbuckling 80 off 49 balls featuring seven sixes and three fours in the run-fest against Sylhet Strikers in the first match of the Sylhet phase yesterday.

Saif currently leads the run-getters' chart with 186 runs.

The Dhaka-born batter said he had a plan before the BPL and that he worked with national team's senior assistant coach Mohammad Salahuddin.

"Definitely there was plan. I worked with Salahuddin sir, who backed me a lot. A lot of the members of this team also backed me," Saif told reporters after his



PHOTO: STAR

career-best T20 knock yesterday.

The pressure of a 205-run chase hardly had an impact on Saif, who came following the dismissal of Azizul Hakim Tamim after the opening over, and took a more attacking approach compared to his

partner from the other hand, Alex Hales.

In the previous game, too, this duo played similar knocks with Saif making an unbeaten 46-ball 62 in a partnership of 113 runs for the third wicket with Hales, who remained not out on 49 off 41 balls, in

Rangpur's eight-wicket win over Fortune Barishal in Mirpur on January 2.

At one stage yesterday, both players had scored 69 off their first 42 balls before Hales took charge by smashing Sylhet skipper Ariful Haque for three sixes and a four in the 16th to motor past Saif.

Hales eventually remained unbeaten on 113 off 56 balls to help Rangpur to an eight-wicket win in the match which witnessed a BPL record of 31 sixes hit. The win, which also the record second-wicket partnership of 186 runs between Saif and Hales, kept Rangpur firmly on top of the table with four wins in four matches.

"There was nothing specific. I only wanted to play according to the merit of the ball," Saif said. "He [Hales] also batted well...He also tries to bat according to merit. He has scored 13 thousand T20 runs. There is a lot to learn from him."

"The wicket was good. I tried to adjust to the wicket. The partnership gradually turned out to be good. But initially I tried to take time. It feels good to contribute to the team in two games," Saif said, adding that he has no regrets over missing out on a century.

With a strike-rate of 137.77 in this BPL, Saif, who had career strike-rate of 112.46 in 58 T20s before the start of this tournament, seems to be on a new mission of turning things around.

‘USA will try to play every World Cup’

A dinner conversation with a fellow cricketer led Aaron Jones, who grew up playing cricket in Barbados, to move to his birth country of USA and represent them in international cricket. Jones, who played a starring role in USA's qualification to the Super Eight stage in last year's ICC T20 World Cup, is now in Bangladesh, playing for the Sylhet Strikers in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). Recently, the 30-year-old spoke with **The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan** regarding his journey from Barbados to USA and the dream T20 World Cup run. The excerpts are as follows:

DS: *You were part of the Rangpur franchise two years back. This time you are with Sylhet Strikers. Does this year's BPL feel different in any way to you compared to your previous stint?*

AJ: I think there is much more hype. I think there's a much bigger fan base. I have seen a lot of comments on my social media accounts. So in that regard, it's much better. I didn't get to play much when I was with Rangpur two years ago. Hopefully, I can change that this season, get on the park and win some games for my team.

DS: *How much have things changed for you and your USA teammates since last year's ICC T20 World Cup?*

AJ: I think I had a really good 2024 to be honest. Obviously, the T20 World Cup brought a lot for me and the USA Cricket, which is really good. We're getting opportunities now. It's just about taking these opportunities and perform.

DS: *You are from Barbados and played alongside current West Indies stars like Shai Hope and Jason Holder at age-level cricket. But then you moved to the*

USA and started playing cricket over there. Why?

AJ: I was born in New York. My parents are from Barbados. So I was living in New York for the first five years of my life. Then my parents decided to go back to Barbados. So I played majority of my cricket as a youngster in Barbados and that's how I ended up playing with Shai Hope and all these guys who are playing for the West Indies right now.

There's a funny story. The USA was playing in our local List A tournament in Barbados. My good friend Steven Taylor, who is actually here for Rangpur this season, just called me to have dinner one night. Then the conversation just came up about me having a USA passport. He was so excited and he talked to the coaches. I was not playing for Barbados in the tournament because I had broken my finger previously in a club game. I played for the USA in the same tournament. I scored like 70-something on debut and the rest is history.

DS: *Talking about history, the USA created history when they beat*

Pakistan in the T20 World Cup. How satisfying was the tournament for you guys?

AJ: Definitely. But this wasn't an overnight thing. This was something we had been working on for the last couple of years. Playing in a World Cup is a great honour. And then doing really well in the World Cup and getting into the Super Eight is fantastic, especially as an associate nation.

DS: *The Super Eight finish has earned the USA a place in the 2026 T20 World Cup. What more has that World Cup brought to cricket in the USA?*

AJ: A lot of people didn't know or follow USA cricket prior to the World Cup. When the ICC announced that the World Cup is going to be in the USA, a lot more focus started coming. Not only did we play and host the World Cup, but we actually did pretty decently and got to the Super Eight. I think it will now only get better. One thing that's important for us is targeting the locals. We want the American-born-and-raised public to really and truly follow and like cricket. We will try to play every World Cup. The standard is set now. We are going to try to play in every World Cup and hopefully some time soon, we can actually win a World Cup as well.

Mahmud sees ‘greed’ in Faruque-Fahim fracas

Former BCB director Khaled Mahmud Sujon came down heavily on BCB president Faruque Ahmed and director Nazmul Abedeen Fahim over perceived 'greed' related to cricket operations department. Fahim, who had talked about resigning from the board earlier on Sunday, revealed in an interview that he wanted the cricket operations role, currently held by the BCB president himself. Mahmud was particularly scathing of Fahim's intentions. "I won't work if I don't get the cricket operations post, I will resign"; this is just greed. I think they have it in them. Why do I need to have the cricket operations role? If I am the chairman of some other committee, why can't I serve there? Is he a master of cricket operations? Akram bhai [Akram Khan] is ahead in that regard; he is the master ahead of Fahim bhai... So why is he [Nazmul] saying that he must get that job? It is becoming a matter of ego, an ego problem between the two. I don't know what's happening," Mahmud said.

Read full story on The Daily Star website

Kabaddi fed eyes historic SL series for growth

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh men's kabaddi team are set to play a five-match test series against Sri Lanka at the Palton ground in Dhaka from February 18 to 29.

The series aims to provide "more international exposure to the national kabaddi team," said Shah Newas Shohag, general secretary of the Bangladesh Kabaddi Federation ad-hoc committee, yesterday.

"As far as I know, Bangladesh hosted such a kabaddi test series involving India in 1974," he informed The Daily Star, adding that they plan to arrange similar series against stronger teams like Iran and Pakistan.

In preparation for the Sri Lanka series, the BKF has announced a 27-member preliminary squad for a residential training camp starting on January 10 at the Kabaddi Court. Six players will join the camp after competing in the franchise-based Nepal Kabaddi League, running from January 17 to February 1.

Badsha Mia, a former national player turned coach, has been appointed as the head coach, with Ashrafur Alam and Bazlur Rashid serving as assistant coaches.

Responding to a query, Shohag explained that they could not appoint National Sports Council coach Abdul Jalil -- who led the national team to



their fourth consecutive Bangabandhu International Kabaddi Cup title last year -- as he is currently contracted with the Bangladesh Police kabaddi team for their preparations from December 10 to March 31.

Meanwhile, the BKF has also selected 27 players to prepare for the Women's Asian Championship in February in Iran and the Women's World Cup in March-April in India.

Additionally, the ad-hoc committee has finalised a six-month plan encompassing age-level training for boys and girls, national men's and women's championships, a youth festival, the junior services kabaddi league, and the corporate women's kabaddi league.

‘Why can’t United do this everywhere?’

REUTERS, Liverpool

Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim was delighted with the intensity his side showed in their breathless 2-2 draw with Premier League leaders Liverpool on Sunday, but said his team's performance left him wanting more.

A week after Amorim said his reeling team could face the threat of relegation, Lisandro Martinez and Amad Diallo scored United's first goals in the cauldron of Anfield since 2018, going toe-to-toe with the league's best team in a well-deserved draw.

"Today I'm allowed to be the only guy upset with the team," Amorim told reporters. "But today we were a team... We faced the competition in the way that we are supposed to face every day, training and match."

The draw saw United climb a spot to 13th in the table, still 11 points behind sixth-placed Manchester City and 13 behind fourth-placed Chelsea, but it felt like a win for the delighted travelling United fans who had braved the wintery drive.

United captain Bruno Fernandes, their best players on the day, said, "If we show this level at Liverpool, first in the league, why can't we do this everywhere?"

United nearly pulled off a victory with Harry Maguire missing a sitter with the last kick of the game.

"I don't think anyone would have predicted them scoring two goals today or nearly nicking it at the end... you can't just pick and choose when you want to turn up for a game at Manchester United," former United captain Roy Keane said on the Sky Sports broadcast.



Star leg spinner Rashid Khan took his seventh wicket of the innings as Afghanistan speedily wrapped up a 72-run victory over Zimbabwe on Monday to win the two-Test series. Afghanistan have now won four of 11 Tests played since winning test status in 2017 -- two of them against Zimbabwe. Rashid tormented Zimbabwe throughout a match interrupted several times by rain, taking four first-innings wickets as well. The 26-year-old deflected attention from himself after receiving the player of the match award, praising second-innings centurions Rahmat Shah (139) -- who was named player of the series -- and debutant Ismat Alam (101) instead. "The way they performed second time round got us back into the match," he said.

PHOTO: CRICKET AFGHANISTAN

Survival at stake for MSC, Abahani

SPORTS REPORTER

Archrivals Mohammedan Sporting Club and Abahani will lock horns in a Group B Federation Cup encounter in Cumilla today.

The match at Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium is scheduled to kick off at 2:45 pm.

Although Mohammedan lead the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) table with six consecutive wins, they have been on the back foot in the Federation Cup, despite beating Chittagong Abahani 6-0 in their previous match, following a 1-0 drubbing at the hands of group leaders Rahmatganj MFS in their tournament opener.

Two teams will progress to the knockouts from the five-team group. "It is a do-or-die match for us because a defeat will throw us out of the competition," said Mohammedan coach Alfaz Ahmed, whose side have not lost to Abahani in the previous six meetings.

In their last meeting, Mohammedan edged past Abahani 1-0 in BPL, courtesy of a strike from Soleymane Diabate. The Malian forward will be central to Mohammedan's chances after missing their BPL fixture against Chittagong Abahani.

Meanwhile, Abahani, sans their foreign players, have also been in good form. The Sky Blues last beat Mohammedan in the 2022-23 BPL season.

"Not thinking of the past; we also don't have an alternative but to win the match if we want to qualify for the second round," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

Jahanara opts out of WI tour for ‘personal matters’

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday announced the women's team squad for this month's West Indies tour, slated to be the Tigresses' first in the Caribbean.

The Tigresses will play three One-Day Internationals -- crucial for their direct qualification to the ODI World Cup this year in India -- and three T20 Internationals, scheduled to run from January 19-31 in St. Kitts.

Lata Mondol and Fariha Islam have returned to the side while Marufa Akter will be in action after sitting out the Ireland T20Is. However, pacer Jahanara Alam has "asked for a temporary break" from the national team due to personal matters, a BCB official informed The Daily Star.

Another source said that Jahanara sought a break due to mental health issues. "She is not retiring. She wants to improve her mental state. She also said that since she isn't playing, she will not be under [central] contract," a BCB official informed.

Jahanara, who played the last home series against Ireland, featured in the T20Is but was not part of the ODI playing eleven.

SQUAD

Nigar Sultana Joty (captain), Nahida Akter (vice-captain), Murshida Khatun, Dilara Akter, Sharmin Akter Supta, Sobhana Mostary, Shorna Akter, Lata Mondol, Rabeya, Fahima Khatun, Fariha Islam Trisna, Sultana Khatun, Farzana Haque, Taj Nehar, Shanjida Akther Maghla, Marufa Akter