

Concerns over Tigers’ CT preparations

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's preparations going into a major event has often come under scrutiny and this time ahead of the Champions Trophy, concerns are being raised about how prepared the team is going into the tournament.

The cricketers have just finished playing the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) and international cricket will be wrought with higher degree of challenges. Many of the players are yet to return to training, especially players from the Fortune Barishal franchise that clinched back-to-back BPL titles last Friday.

A look at what other teams who are set to play the Champions Trophy would put Bangladesh's preparations into further context.

New Zealand and South Africa are playing a tri-nation ODI series, also involving hosts Pakistan. England are preparing through a three-match ODI series away in India. Australia are set to take on hosts Sri Lanka in a two-match ODI series, having thrashed the Lankans in a two-match Test series.

Only Afghanistan and Bangladesh are going into the tournament without having played any ODIs in the last one month.

Nine days remain before Bangladesh open their Champions Trophy campaign against India on February 20 in Dubai and it was not a surprise that the Tigers' head coach Phil Simmons remained concerned.

"I agree that it is not the best preparation," Simmons told reporters before a training session in Mirpur yesterday.

"But they [cricketers] were playing white-ball cricket, which means that they are sharp skills-wise. We have to get their minds up to 50-over cricket in the next six or seven days. They have the skills. They are performing. It is about getting to that 50-over mentality now," he added.

Simmons also mentioned that his troops will up the ante in training in the coming days.

"We will have double practice sessions in the next couple of days. We bat and bowl in the morning, and then do the same under the lights. We are getting ourselves prepared to bat for 50 overs," Simmons said.

Shifting between formats has traditionally been a difficult prospect for the Tigers and when it comes to shifting to international cricket from BPL, the task certainly appears a lot steeper. The Tigers found out how difficult high-scoring pitches are to get a result in during the ODIs against the West Indies in December last year while the last ODI World Cup also showed deficiencies in that regard.

Simmons felt that focus needed to shift fast so that they can be prepared for the India game in Dubai. "The first part of the preparation is about Dubai. Once we can get ourselves in the right frame of mind, and work on the right things for Dubai, I think we can start the competition well. We will get familiar conditions in Pakistan after that," he said.



Bangladesh batter Soumya Sarker fiddles with the ball alongside head coach Phil Simmons in the national team's training session at Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The left-handed batter suffered an injury scare while batting when he got hit on his right-hand by a rising delivery bowled by Mritunjay Chowdhury but Bangladesh Cricket Board sources confirmed later in the day that there are no major concerns about the 31-year-old's participation in the upcoming Champions Trophy in Pakistan, starting on February 19.

PHOTO: STAR

‘Mental health isn’t quite valued in Bangladesh’

Despite having topped the run charts in the National Cricket League T20 (316 runs) and recently concluded Bangladesh Premier League T20 (511), opening batter Mohammad Naim remains overlooked for the national team since September 2023. In a conversation with The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan, the 25-year-old discussed his frustrations over missed opportunities and approach to overcoming setbacks, among other issues. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): Following a purple patch, what are your expectations?

Mohammad Naim (MN): If I keep the expectation that I should get a chance in the team and if it doesn't happen, self-doubt will occur. Currently, I'm planning to perform well in the next tournament [for Prime Bank in Dhaka Premier League from March 3].

DS: Do you feel unlucky about limited opportunities?

MN: You are talking about my performance in the last two or three seasons, but how many opportunities did I get in national team then? Nobody asked me about my mental health at that time. When I was at peak form, I couldn't utilise the opportunity in ODI setup. Nobody wants to know why I couldn't do that. I don't want to blame anyone and feel that it was my fault that I couldn't prepare myself well mentally. Scoring 900-plus [932] runs in a tournament [in DPL 2023] isn't a joke.

In Bangladesh, mental health isn't quite valued that much. But it can have an impact on some cricketers, if not everyone. When I played under Russell Domingo, you can check my performance. But when I was under [Chandika] Hathurusingha, I didn't feel that the coach wanted me to be mentally stable. I couldn't play fearless



cricket in those ODIs [six matches] I played under him and always had a fear that if I failed, I would be dropped.

DS: How has your mindset changed?

MN: Right now, I have developed a mentality that, no matter how big a coach

you are, you can't disturb me mentally. But I didn't have that attitude two or three years ago like I do now. I think professional and personal life both matter a lot in staying organised.

DS: How hard is it to prepare when out of the national team?

MN: My regular job is to perform at the top level and always remain on the radar of the national team. When I was dropped from the national team, I should have been in the Bangladesh Tigers programme or any other camp. But I wasn't considered for anywhere. So what message did I get? Actually, when I performed at the top level and my performance wasn't valued, it raised questions about the quality of the domestic tournaments. But do you have anything better than the BPL or DPL in the country?

DS: Your strike rate was criticised before. Have you worked on it?

MN: Not only in this BPL, but I also batted with a good strike rate in the NCL T20 as well. I have been doing mind-training for the last three years. But it takes time to implement these things in your game. Apart from that, my family also helped me stay away from negativity. People will say both good and bad things about me, but I don't think much about that now.

BFF signs contracts with 36 female footballers

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday signed contracts with 36 players of the national women's football teams, confirmed a source within the BFF.

The federation has prepared contract papers for 55 footballers including 18 rebellious ones, who have been boycotting the national team's training camp under Peter Butler since January 29.

Out of a total of 55 players in the BFF camp, 37 players have been training under Butler for the upcoming two friendly matches in UAE against the hosts, which will be played on February 26 and March 2.

It could not be confirmed whether any of those 18 players signed the contracts, but the source informed that the contracts of 19 others in training are in process of completion.

Another source within the BFF said the BFF president Tabitha Awal has promised the 18 rebellious players that if they signed the contracts, they would be confirmed places in the final squad but that they would have to secure their places in the playing eleven with their own performance.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Barcelona winger Raphinha netted his 13th goal of the season as the Catalan giants romped to a 4-1 win away at Sevilla despite being reduced to 10 players in the LaLiga on Sunday. Barca striker Robert Lewandowski – the league's top-scorer – also found the net (extending his tally to 19) alongside Fermin Lopez and Eric Garcia to lift third-placed Barca to 48 points, one behind Atletico Madrid in second and two off leaders Real Madrid after the capital rivals drew 1-1 on Saturday. Lopez was shown red in the 62nd minute but Barca held firm to wrap up a victory that keeps them firmly in the title race.

SHORT CORNER

Djokovic says injury 'almost 100 percent healed'

Novak Djokovic said Monday his leg injury, which shattered his Australian Open dream, was "almost 100 percent healed" and he was ready to aim for his 100th ATP title in Doha this month.

Ireland beat Zim in one-off Test

Spinner Matthew Humphreys starred again in Bulawayo on Monday as Ireland wrapped up a 63-run win over Zimbabwe in a one-off Test.

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City hope to show they are ‘something special’ against Real

AFP, Manchester

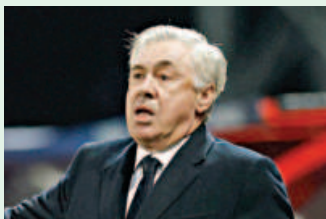
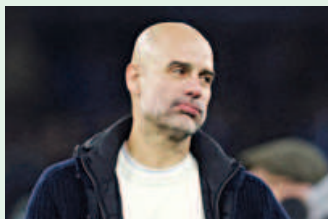
Pep Guardiola has challenged his Manchester City side to prove they are still "something special" in their blockbuster Champions League tie against Real Madrid despite a turbulent season for the Premier League champions.

The two clubs meet in Europe's elite competition for a fourth consecutive season but this time much earlier in the tournament as both under-performed in the new league phase.

City sneaked into the next round in 22nd place in the 36-team table by winning their final game against Club Brugge, while defending champions Real finished 11th.

Guardiola admitted at Monday's pre-match press conference that his team, European champions in 2023, were "not even close" to finishing in the top eight, which meant automatic qualification for the last 16.

Real Madrid, European champions a record 15 times, secured a seeding for the knockout playoffs, meaning they host the second leg of the tie,



This will be the 13th time that Manchester City will lock horns with Real Madrid in the Champions League. City have won four while Real came out victorious on three occasions. Five matches ended in a draw.

Real Madrid have knocked out an English club out of the Champions League knockout stages 13 times.

Real are yet to win a Champions League game at Etihad. Los blancos have lost three and drew twice away at City.

City's only victories in the competition this season have come against Slovan Bratislava, Sparta Prague and Club Brugge.

This is the fourth time in a row that Man City and Real Madrid have been drawn against each other in the Champions League. Also City vs Real is just the fourth fixture in European Cup and UCL history to be played in four consecutive seasons.

In big matches this season, Real lost four, drew two and won none so far. (Atletico 1-1 Real; Real 1-3 AC Milan; Real 0-4 Barca; Liverpool 2-0 Real; Real 2-5 Barca; Real 1-1 Atletico)

which the City boss admitted was an advantage.

"When you finish 22nd (out of 24) you cannot ask any favour, you cannot ask anything that you didn't win," Guardiola said ahead of Tuesday's first leg at the Etihad.

"Always I believe what happens in football, normally you have to deserve it and we didn't deserve it."

City are currently in fifth spot in the Premier League and realistically out of the title race.

"I will not deny how I trust the players that gave us the incredible decade, all of us, winning a lot of things and playing at high standards and I know what we are capable of," he said.

"The team has something special and hopefully tomorrow we can prove it."

And defender Ruben Dias said he believes City can still achieve something "beautiful" this season.

"Since I have been here this is maybe the most difficult season so far, but I am a firm believer that in the most difficult scenario you can still achieve something beautiful," the Portugal international said.



Debutant Matthew Breetzke reached a unique milestone on Monday as the South African opener scored 150 -- the highest score by any batter in his first ODI -- to lift the Proteas to 304-6 against New Zealand in the second match of the tri-series, also involving Pakistan, at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore. Breetzke also became the fourth player from his country to hit a century on ODI debut but his efforts were overshadowed by a brilliant [Inset] Kane Williamson century that helped the Black Caps win the game by six wickets and ensure a spot in the final of the competition. Williamson's 113-ball 133 is his 13th in ODI and first since his ton against West Indies in the 2019 ODI World Cup.

PHOTO: AFP

