



ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

Pakistan pursue perfect start on ‘HISTORIC OCCASION’

AGENCIES

Pakistan begin their Champions Trophy 2025 title defence with a firm test against former champions New Zealand in Karachi today.

The hosts have a stacked squad with talent in all departments with Mohammed Rizwan leading the charge. Rizwan's side was tipped by former Pakistan skipper Sarfaraz Khan, who won the competition in 2017, to defend their title in 2025.

"Pakistan have a really good chance of defending that title and I think they have a strong team. Some of the boys from 2017 are still there and we're talking about some of the best – especially Babar Azam," Sarfaraz told the ICC.

On the other hand, New Zealand have been plagued with injury issues especially in the bowling department, with Lockie Ferguson (foot injury) joining Ben Sears in being ruled out of the tournament.

The two sides recently met in the

Tri-Nation Series in Pakistan in the leadup to the Champions Trophy. The Mitchell Santner-led New Zealand showed great form, winning all their fixtures including the final to take the trophy.

"Different guys stepping up at different times is good. Though it means nothing till we play that first game at the Champions Trophy," Santner said after New Zealand's Tri-Nation series win.

"We've played Pakistan a lot, home and away, so we've got a good read on each other. We'll take a little bit of confidence into that first game," he said.

While this gives a much-needed boost to New Zealand, it leaves Pakistan with some work to do ahead of the Champions Trophy opener.

The Champions Trophy is the first major cricket event hosted by Pakistan in nearly three decades and is regarded as second only to the World Cup in the one-day game.

"A global event has come to

Pakistan after 29 years so I think the whole nation should enjoy this historic occasion," Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan said on the eve of the tournament, which runs until March 9.

"Having done well in the ODIs recently adds to the excitement and build-up towards the mega-event, and we eagerly look forward to playing in front of our home crowd and excelling in the eight-team tournament."

Former Pakistan captain Inzamam-ul-Haq said, "Right now everyone [in Pakistan] is talking about the Champions Trophy, in schools, houses, markets, offices, everywhere."

Another former Pakistan captain Ramiz Raja said holding the Champions Trophy has enormous significance that goes beyond sport.

"This Champions Trophy is about youth engagement, cultural promotion and building a global image," he said.

● Pakistan and New Zealand faced off 118 times in ODIs, with Pakistan holding a slight edge with 61 wins to New Zealand's 53. Three matches have ended without a result, while one ended in a tie.

● In the ICC Champions Trophy, the two teams have met thrice, with Pakistan winning two and New Zealand securing one victory.

● New Zealand, however, come into the contest on the back of consecutive wins against Pakistan in Lahore and Karachi in the recently concluded Tri-Nation Series (also involving South Africa) which the Black Caps won.

● Pakistan, on the other hand, got

the better of New Zealand in their last 50-over meeting in an ICC event. They beat the Black Caps by 21 runs in the 2023 ODI World Cup in India.

● New Zealand hold a narrow advantage at the National Stadium in Karachi, the venue for the match, as they boast five wins compared to Pakistan's four in nine meetings at the ground.

● The National Stadium, known for flat pitches and high-scoring contests, has seen an average first innings total of 303 in the last five matches.

● Fakhar Zaman -- the player of the final in the 2017 edition of the tournament -- and Babar

● Azam are the only two members from Pakistan's triumphant campaign in 2017 to have been included in the squad this time around.

● Fakhar has played the most number of ODIs against the Black Caps, featuring in 19 out of his 85 matches. He averages 65.81 and has a best score of 180 not out against the Black Caps.

● Kane Williamson has scored the most runs in New Zealand-Pakistan contests, amassing 1290 runs in 24 matches at an average of 56.08. The right-handed batter boasts eight half-centuries and three centuries against Pakistan.

City's chance to pull off a miracle in Madrid

AGENCIES

When the topic of miracles in the Champions League comes to the fore, the first team that would pop up in any fan's mind would be Real Madrid.

This time, however, it is Manchester City who are in need of pulling off a miracle at the Santiago Bernabeu -- the home of the tournament's most successful team -- as Pep Guardiola's men face Real in the second leg today.

City blew a late 2-1 lead in the first leg of the playoff tie last week at home to lose 3-2 to the holders.

Real go into the second leg with a goal in hand, a clear advantage for the record 15-time champions who have made a habit of turning the tie around in the dying minutes -- especially in the Champions League.

City boss Guardiola said his side have just a one percent chance of progress to the last 16 against Real but the English champions' new recruits could offer a lifeline.

City's collapse in the first leg was part of a wider trend this season as Guardiola's ageing squad have struggled to last the pace, particularly when the intensity is turned up on Champions League nights.

As a consequence, City broke with their usual transfer policy to spend big in January, bringing in Omar Marmoush, Abdou Diallo, Vitor Reis and Nico Gonzalez for fees totalling £170 million (\$214 million).

However, none of them started the first leg against Madrid, with only Marmoush making an appearance for few minutes.

Guardiola may now regret that decision after Marmoush, Gonzalez and Diallo all played pivotal roles in arguably City's best performance of the season on Saturday when Newcastle were blown away 4-0 at Etihad.

Marmoush hogged the headlines thanks to his first-half hat-trick, finally offering City another potent scoring threat to complement Erling Haaland.

Diallo recovered from his nightmare Premier League debut against Chelsea last month when he gave away a goal inside three minutes. This time the Uzbek showed why City paid Lens a reported 40 million euros.

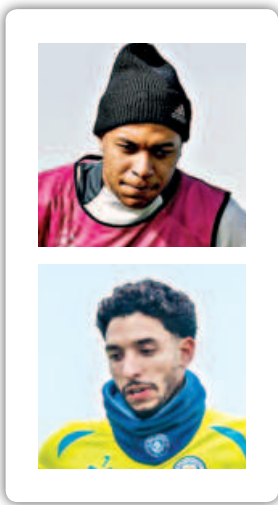
The 20-year-old's pace helped sniff out the danger posed by Newcastle's Alexander Isak and could be what the visitors need to combat the threat of Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Junior, and Rodrygo.

Guardiola, though, reserved special praise for the impact of Gonzalez in bringing the City midfield the stability they have lacked since Ballon d'Or winner Rodri suffered a serious knee injury in September. Gonzalez seems certain to start on his return to Spain with his manager already hailing the 23-year-old as a "mini Rodri."

Yet, even at their best during the golden years of Guardiola's reign in Manchester, City have often found the might of Madrid too tough a nut to crack in the Champions League.

This is the fourth consecutive season the sides have met, with a 5-1 aggregate rout en route to winning the competition for the first time in 2023 City's only success.

But Guardiola is still not ready to give up. "If you ask anybody before that game, we have one percent chance [against Real] but as much as we have a chance we will try. That's for sure," Guardiola said.



Gauging conditions key to Tigers' CT opener

SPORTS REPORTER

Unlocking the puzzle of how the wicket at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium will play and what would be the right team combination are two factors that could decide the fate of Bangladesh's ICC Champions Trophy opener against India on Thursday before it even begins.

After the lacklustre performance against Pakistan Shaheens in the lone warm-up match on Monday at the ICC Academy in Dubai, in which Bangladesh got bundled out for just 202 and the opposition chased down the target with seven wickets to spare and 91 balls in hand, the management could be tempted to beef up their batting against India.

However, if Bangladesh sacrifice bowling options to do so, they could find themselves in the deep end against a heavyweight Indian batting lineup.

To find the right balance, the management has to correctly predict how the wicket will behave.

The Dubai venue was one of the three stadiums used in the T20. The pitches have reportedly been given two weeks' recovery time after the tournament, but there remains confusion regarding whether it will be on the slower side or play as an absolute batting paradise.

The recent T20 did not see dew factor come into play but that doesn't guarantee that it would not be present during the tournament as Matthew Sandery, the head curator at the Dubai International Stadium, told the ESPNcricinfo that "dew is a funny thing."

During the T20, spinners had

a better economy (7.46) than faster bowlers (8.08) but pacers bagged more wickets and had a better average in ODIs.

Since 2018, the average first innings total at the venue in ODIs where the team batting first won

Chakravarthy and both are regarded as X-factors going into the tournament.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh players named their own wrist-spinner Rishad Hossain as the potential 'game changer' in the Champions



has been 252, which should work in Bangladesh's favour as the side historically struggle to consistently breach the 300-run mark in ODIs.

There is no cross-ventilation at the stadium, which means that pacers do not get the ball to swing for a long period of time. Thus, length and seam deviation would be key to succeed for the Tiger's much-fancied pace attack.

It may be likely that India will go in with three spinners and three pacers in the eleven and Bangladesh will also be thinking of what spin options will be conducive.

India have five spinners in the lineup with two wrist spinners in Kuldeep Yadav and Varun

Trophy.

"A wrist-spinner is always a game-changer so we're looking for Rishad," opener Soumya Sarkar told ICC in an interview.

Pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib and skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto also spoke about Rishad's importance in the tournament, with the latter saying the wrist spinner's role would be "more important" in the Pakistan leg.

But before thinking about the matches against Pakistan and New Zealand in Rawalpindi, Shanto and Co need to figure out how they are going to topple arguably the strongest team in Group A in their tournament opener.



Captains of nine teams pose with the Women's Premier Division Cricket League trophy at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The tournament, which begins today with matches across three venues, will be played without the participation of former champions Rupali Bank who opted out due to the change in management in the tournament's organising committee. National team stars Nahida Akter and Marufa Akter will not be taking part in the tournament due to injuries.

PHOTO: STAR

SHORT CORNER

Liverpool can handle title tension: Slot

Arne Slot insists Liverpool can handle the mounting pressure of the Premier League title race after the leaders were hampered by nerves in their tense win against Wolves. Slot's side head to Aston Villa on Wednesday knowing a victory would move them 10 points clear of second-placed Arsenal in their bid to clinch a record-equalling 20th English title.

Lewandowski lifts Barca past Rayo and into Liga lead

Robert Lewandowski scored from the penalty spot as Barcelona scraped out a 1-0 home win over Rayo Vallecano on Monday to climb top of the Spanish Liga. Lewandowski scored his 20th goal of the season with a 28th-minute penalty that went in off the post.

Read full stories on The Daily Star's website.

Unheralded Najimul breaks 31-year-old record

SPORTS REPORTER

Unheralded Najimul Hossain Rony broke a 31-year-old record in 400m hurdles of the ongoing National Athletics Championships after clocking 50.84 seconds event at the National Stadium yesterday.

The previous record belonged to Bangladesh Navy's Abdur Rahim Nayeem, who had set it in December, 1993 with a timing of 51.87 seconds.

The second day of the championships saw two more records in women's 400m hurdles and women's 4x100 metre relay, with Bangladesh Army leading the medals table with 15 gold, 14 silver and 14 bronze medals while Navy won 13 gold, 12 silver and eight bronze medals.

Najimul, who started his athletics career after getting into Bangladesh Army in 2017, was initially a 400m printer where he won a silver medal in 2023. But he switched to 400m hurdles and won gold in the last edition in 2024.

"I didn't know much about athletics before getting into Bangladesh Army.



Record-breaker Najimul Hossain on the right.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

After completing my basic training in December 2017, I won a gold medal in a hurdles event of inter-unit athletics championships," Najimul said.

"I was confident about eclipsing my previous record and winning gold because I clocked a good time in training and the

coach also encouraged me to make it," Najimul said, hoping to do even better at international level, especially in the South Asian Games.

"Whatever timing I produced today is enough to win a medal in the South Asian Games but I believe I can improve further

and deliver a gold medal to the nation if I am given better facilities and training," said Najimul, adding that he would buy a pair of running shoes with the cash-award of Tk 20,000 for setting the record.

Meanwhile, Masud Rana of Army and Raibul Islam of Bangladesh Air Force became second and third by clocking 53.06 seconds and 53.26 seconds respectively in the same event.

In women's 400m hurdles, Borsha Khatun of Bangladesh Army clocked 1:04.61 seconds to set a new national record, eclipsing the previous record of 1:04:70 seconds set by Libia Khatun in 2022.

"I was encouraged to see my timings in training. I am really happy with the record," said the 24-year-old, who had previously won a gold medal in the same event. Bangladesh Navy's women's relay team comprising Shirin Akter, Sonia Akter, Sumaya Dewan and Kabita Roy produced a new record in 4x100 relay with a timing of 46.43 seconds, breaking the previous record of 48.10 seconds produced by Bangladesh Army.