

Can batters lift Bangladesh in Pindi?

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Rawalpindi

"Bangladesh's got a good bowling attack, that's what I like about them. But big concern is about the batters," Pakistan's head curator Tony Hemming said this yesterday when asked about Bangladesh's chances in today's match against New Zealand.

Tony worked as a curator educator for the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) from July 2023 to July 2024 and due to his association with the Tigers, he knows about their strengths and weaknesses very well.

Bangladesh's rise in the pace-bowling department in recent years is nothing unknown but at the same time, their performance as a batting unit in bilateral and global events has been on a downward curve and has let the entire unit down many a times.

The Tigers have already suffered due to their batting in their opening Group A match of the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy against India in Dubai where their top-order crumbled and they were reduced to 35-5 in not time.

Centurion Towhid Hridoy and Jaker Ali then put up a rescue act with a brilliant 154-run partnership to bail Bangladesh out from the early collapse but it wasn't enough to avert defeat.

If Bangladesh find themselves in a similar situation against New Zealand in today's do-or-die contest, a similar rescue act would once again most likely fall short on the typically flat surfaces at Rawalpindi.

In recent years, this venue has witnessed many big chases, the latest ones coming in 2023, when Pakistan won two

games against New Zealand chasing 337 and 289 runs.

Keeping this record in mind, Bangladesh surely won't want any kind of slip ups in their batting, otherwise, their dreams of progressing to the knockout phase of the Champions Trophy could end today.

Poor form of some of the batters and the fact that three of the top six batters got out for a duck against India raises concerns and it would be interesting to see what changes the team management makes for the match against the Kiwis.

"I'm not concerned about their form. I just think that we need to assess and put together our batting in the first 10 overs a little bit better than we've done. And as you say, the middle order and the lower order have done really well. So, it's up to our top order batters to put things together in the first 10 overs, 15 overs especially," Bangladesh head coach Phil Simmons told reporters during a press conference yesterday. "Some teams are different in tournament cricket than in a series, so you can't really match it up like that. So, you have to take what they're going into the tournament with now and then look at that, not look at the past series," he added.



Bangladesh's Towhid Hridoy is 23 runs away from 1000 ODI runs. New Zealand's Glenn Phillips is four runs shy of the same landmark.

Bangladesh have won 11 ODIs in 45 overall meetings against New Zealand. The Tigers lost 33 matches and one encounter between the sides produced no result.

The Tigers won the latest meeting between the sides -- a maiden ODI win away to New Zealand in December 2023.

Bangladesh beat New Zealand in their previous Champions Trophy meeting, in Cardiff in 2017, thanks to a record 224-run stand between Mahmudullah Riyad and Shakib Al Hasan.

The only other time Bangladesh played New Zealand in the Champions Trophy, the Tigers were bundled out for 77 runs -- their lowest total in the competition so far. Bangladesh were hammered by 167 runs in that game in Colombo in 2002.

Ex-BCB man keeps Tigers on their toes

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Rawalpindi

Soon after he tendered his resignation to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) abruptly in last year's July, renowned curator Tony Hemming joined the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on a two-year contract.

One of Tony's immediate tasks was to prepare wickets for Pakistan's home series against Bangladesh and during his

just couldn't read it," Tony, who is currently overseeing the wickets of the ICC Champions Trophy across the three Pakistan venues -- Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi -- told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Australian curator has prepared three wickets for three different games at Rawalpindi, starting with the Bangladesh-New Zealand match today, which he said would be played on a bare pitch with hardly any grass.

batters more than the bowlers.

"We will finish Pakistan-Bangladesh in the middle [pitch], some green grass are there.

"Most of them close to 300 [par score]... Normally, there's a good balance between bat and ball. But the grass has been buried because of the winter. So, for batters it would be playing beautifully," he said.

On Saturday, Australia chased down a target of 352 runs in 47.3 overs in Lahore and after the match, Australia's centurion Josh Inglis claimed that dew made life easier for them.

Tony said dew could play a big role in Rawalpindi as well.

"We will have dew. So normally, dew helps the second team batting, doesn't it? So, it will be a challenge," he added.

Meanwhile, during the press meet, New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner said they would formulate a plan for the Bangladesh game keeping the wickets' behaviour in mind.

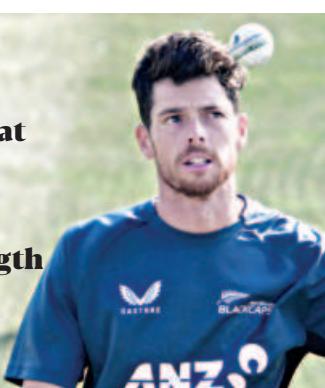
"We've got a few plans for Bangladesh, but I think we obviously have to wait and see what the wicket does," said Santner a day before the game.

"If it is pretty flat, I think it is probably similar stuff to what we've been operating in Karachi. It's hitting that hard length for a long period of time."

"I think traditionally it's quite a high scoring ground so we have to be on it then with the bat, we just talk about trying to build partnerships and do that out there."

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New Zealand skipper
MITCHELL SANTNER



first assignment, Pakistan suffered their first ever defeat against Bangladesh on home soil and also lost the two-match Test series 2-0 at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in August-September.

"That was funny, wasn't it? The first Test, Bangladesh beat Pakistan on this soil and on my pitch... I was like a traitor [laughs]. The pitch I made here was a very good cricket wicket. But Pakistan

"What I can say is that there's no grass. Because we played one tournament for a month here in December, [with matches] every day. And we had ice on the field every day. So, the grass is recovering."

Tony also said that the wicket which would be used for the Bangladesh-Pakistan tie on February 27 is the greenest of the three but said all of the wickets at Rawalpindi would help the

'Arsenal must use anger to rekindle title hopes'

REUTERS, London

Arsenal must suffer for 48 hours and use the anger of their 1-0 home defeat by West Ham United to rekindle their Premier League title challenge, manager Mikel Arteta said on Saturday.

It was meant to be a weekend when Arsenal would put pressure on leaders Liverpool by beating West Ham and closing the gap to five points ahead of Liverpool's game at champions Manchester City on Sunday.

Instead, a toothless Arsenal lost at home in the league for the first time in 10 months and could find themselves 11 points adrift come Sunday night.

"Very disappointed, obviously very angry as well. I think you have to congratulate West Ham for the victory and the game that they played," Arteta told reporters.

"But as well I think a lot from our side that we never got right. Even though we had 20 shots, I never felt that we were at the standard and the level that we needed.

"We have to be (angry), I hope we are very much because we didn't hit the levels today and I am very much responsible for that so I am very, very angry."

With forwards Kai Havertz, Gabriel Jesus, Gabriel Martinelli, and Bukayo



Saka all ruled out with injuries, Arsenal's makeshift attack struggled to make any impact against West Ham.

Arteta refused to use the injuries as an excuse though.

"No, I refuse that completely because I am talking about the standards of the players and the team that we had today, me included. And that was nowhere near the levels that we have to hit to have the opportunity to win a Premier League."

Arteta can now only hope that Manchester City do them a favour on Sunday and that his side can respond away against third-placed Nottingham Forest on Wednesday.

"Honestly, I think we have to look in the mirror at ourselves of what we can do better," Arteta said.

"First of all (we have to) suffer for 24 or 48 hours, suffer and feel the pain and make sure that we come back to training on Monday with that bite and that anger still in the stomach for Wednesday."

On the title race, Arteta said: "It's not in our hands. For me, I'm really, really annoyed about the things that are in our hands and we didn't do as well as we possibly could and that's the performance and the result today."

Butler banks on new team but keeps door open for seniors

SPORTS REPORTER

Putting the issue of senior and junior players aside, Bangladesh women's football team coach Peter Butler termed his 23 member squad as a new national team, which will leave for Dubai tonight for two FIFA friendly matches against the United Arab Emirates.

The 58-year-old coach felt the young team, despite the boycott saga by the seniors, have had a good preparation for the two matches, scheduled for February 26 and March 2.

"It's been a good preparation. I love to say it is really a positive and exciting squad of players; delighted with the group the way they actually did know many things and many topics last two to three weeks."

"The most important thing from my perspective is it is a group for future and looking forward to them. They can make mistakes but they will gain experience," Butler said in his opening speech at the BFF House yesterday.

Asked how challenging it would be without the senior players, Butler said: "There is no question of senior or junior players. It is a national team. In my opinion, it is a new national team which has new vision and new opportunity to look



forward. I think it is a very important fact that I picked the team which was available; I picked the team which has potential... I don't want to distinguish between seniors or juniors."

Asked whether he would accept the rebel players if they decided to return to training, Butler said: "My door is always open, the door to train is always open. The people will decide whether they want to come back. I don't mind it. It is their choice because life moves on with or without them; I will move on with another group of players. If they

don't want to come, it is okay but within the group, a small number of players whom I respect for their football quality, whether they have been misguided, or blackmailed, that is their problem, it is not my problem."

Pledging to deliver good results against the UAE, captain Afidea Khandokar said: "I don't feel the their (seniors) absence because I played with them in the U-19 and U-20 groups. The way they practised, we also practised the same way. It is just that they have experience of playing more matches and we may have less experience."