

Batters baffled by BRACEWELL CHALLENGE

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Rawalpindi

It appears Bangladesh got a question paper out of the syllabus during their do-or-die ICC Champions Trophy match against New Zealand in Rawalpindi yesterday, as four out of their first six batters were dismissed by allrounder Michael Bracewell.

Opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim (24), Towhid Hridoy (seven), Mushfiqur Rahim (two) and Mahmudullah (four) all threw away their wickets to the off-spinner, who used the wind effectively to drift his deliveries, operating as the Black Caps' fifth bowling option. Bracewell finished the innings with a career-best bowling performance of 4-26, restricting the Tigers to 236-9 after being sent in to bat first.

Historically, the surface at Rawalpindi Stadium provides sporting wickets, where predominantly high-scoring matches are evident, keeping recent records in mind. Apart from that, the wicket also assists the pacers. Looking at both teams' playing eleven yesterday, where they fielded three genuine pacers each, it gave a clear indication that their batters had prepared with extra responsibility.

However, Bangladeshi batters might have forgotten the most recent match



PHOTO: AFP

record at this venue. The venue hosted its last international match between Pakistan and England in October last year, where Pakistani spinners took all 20 wickets in that Test to help their side clinch a 2-1 series win.

It was not only about the number of

wickets Bracewell picked up. The poor shot selection of Bangladeshi batters, aided by a great fielding display by New Zealand, cost the Tigers dearly in this crucial match.

Before coming into the match, Bangladesh knew very well that they must

score 300 plus or have the mentality to chase down a massive total on this wicket, not only to win the contest but also to keep their semifinal hopes alive. However, the way the batters approached the game, where they gave 181 dot balls in 50 overs, their lack of planning was surely visible.

For example, Tanzid tried to play across the line on Bracewell's second ball, while Hridoy was dismissed at extra cover by a brilliant catch from Kane Williamson after getting the ball only sliced up. It was even more disappointing from the seniors, as Mushfiqur tried to play a big slog-sweep on only his fifth ball to become Bracewell's third prey.

Meanwhile, Mahmudullah, who returned to the side after missing the India game, ran down the track and hacked across the line, managing only an outside edge that floated towards the short third man, where it was taken easily.

It was only Najmul Hossain Shanto, who opened for Bangladesh once again in this format after 27 months and 34 ODIs, and Jaker Ali in the lower middle order who made some notable contributions in the innings. However, once it's all on the line for any side, such one or two contributions hardly matter in the outcome.

Trailblazer Ayonto draws 'hope' for Mahatos

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU from Pabna

From humble beginnings to the national stage, Ayonto Bala Mahato's journey reads like a script from a feel-good film.

Born into a poverty-stricken indigenous family in Sirajganj's Raiganj upazila, she spent her childhood in a mud-walled hut topped with a tin roof. Her parents, both labourers, worked tirelessly, earning barely enough to put food on the table.

But then, football stepped in and changed everything.

At just 16, left-winger Ayonto is set to represent Bangladesh in two FIFA friendly matches in Dubai on February 26 and March 2, having flown to the UAE with the squad yesterday.

Her selection stems not only from her undeniable talent but also from head coach Peter Butler's decision to opt for a younger squad. Following a player-coach dispute, 18 senior players from the SAFF Women's Championship-winning team last year in Nepal were left out, creating opportunities for fresh faces like Ayonto.

Her inspiring ascent to the top has sent ripples of joy across the village of Grotthita.

The daughter of farmer Monil Mahato,



Ayonto discovered football on the fields of her local primary school. Despite the struggles they faced, her family always encouraged her passion.

"My sister has loved football since childhood, so we enrolled her in an academy in the village three years ago... We found out about her selection a few days ago," her brother, Joy Kumar Mahato, told The Daily Star, with pride evident in his voice.

That academy was Nimgachhi Promila Football Academy, where Ayonto's remarkable potential quickly caught the attention of scouts. While still in the sixth grade, she earned a coveted spot at the prestigious BKSP.

Life, however, was not easy for her family, as they earned only around Tk 600 a day. Witnessing their relentless struggle, Joy took on a job in a local shop to support the family -- after Monil became unable to work due to ill health -- and to contribute to his sister's dreams.

Despite these hardships, Ayonto flourished. After completing her initial training at BKSP and putting up a dazzling show in the BKSP Cup held earlier this year, she became a strong candidate for a spot in the national team, informed BKSP assistant coach Mahbubur Rahman Litu.

"If she stays in the national camp for 3-4 years, her future will be bright," opined Litu.

For Ayonto, this breakthrough is "beyond expectations," and success is not merely a personal triumph; it is a monumental milestone for the Mahato community.

"As a poor farmer, my only dream was to feed my family. But my daughter has given us something greater -- hope," her father Monil expressed.

Uzzal Kumar Mahato, a local social worker, said, "No one from the Mahato community [in North Bengal] has ever played for the national team. She is the first, and we are immensely proud."

Aus, SA collide with semifinal spot up for grabs

AGENCIES

Australia will face South Africa on Tuesday in Rawalpindi, where the winner will take an enormous stride towards the semifinals of the ICC Champions Trophy 2025.

South African captain Temba Bavuma on Monday said his side would not be taking world champions Australia lightly despite a depleted bowling attack.

The two former Trophy champions meet for the first time in the event's history, having each won their first games in Group B.

Australia -- missing their pace trio of Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc -- chased down a stiff 352 run target against England in Lahore -- on Saturday.

It was the highest-ever chase in the event's history started in 1998.

Bavuma hailed Australia's penchant for International Cricket Council (ICC) events.

"I mean any Australian outfit that comes together for an ICC event is always one that you don't take lightly," said Bavuma in a press conference.

"They don't have their mainstay bowling attack but I think their batters may be doing a little bit more than what they're accustomed to," he added.

Bavuma hopes his own batters will take advantage of Australia's inexperienced bowling.

South Africa blunted the famed Afghanistan spin attack, taking 59 runs off world's best Rashid Khan in 10 wicket-less overs.

Alex Carey said Australia are excited by the challenge posed by a formidable South Africa.

Carey made a brilliant 69 alongside man-of-the-match Josh Inglis, who scored his maiden one-day international hundred, to seal a five-wicket win.

"I think South Africa are playing really well in one-day cricket and look like they've got a great balance across their 11 players," the 33-year-old Carey said on Monday.

"So, another exciting opportunity for us coming off the back of a great game against England, play with a lot of freedom, take the game on."

The Proteas have also won four out of the five ODIs against Australia.

Australia and South Africa have never faced each other in the ICC Champions Trophy.

Since 2016, South Africa have batted first 12 times against Australia in ODIs and lost only two of those matches. The most recent of these defeats was the semifinal of the 2023 ODI World Cup.

Australia's Glenn Maxwell is 17 runs away from 4000 ODI runs. South Africa's Lungi Ngidi needs one wicket to complete 100 wickets in the format.

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Tony promises to return to Bangladesh for adopted daughter

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Rawalpindi

Eight months ago, curator Tony Hemming parted ways with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) while still having a year left on his two-year contract, expressing dissatisfaction at some of the incidents during his short tenure.

The renowned curator was hired by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in the very next week on a two-year contract.

Considering Tony's reputation as a leading curator and the way his previous tenure ended in Bangladesh, it is very unlikely that the Australian will rejoin the BCB any time soon.

Still, during a lengthy discussion with a few Bangladeshi journalists in Rawalpindi, Tony was asked whether he plans to return to Bangladesh anytime soon.

His reply stunned everyone.

"I have to [return to Bangladesh]... I adopted a daughter in Bangladesh," Tony came up with this unexpected reply.

"She is in Sylhet. She is not young, she is 20, she works in a hotel," he continued, detailing how this unique bond was formed.

"I stayed in Sylhet for a period of like three weeks, preparing a Test wicket. We were talking every day at breakfast. She told me she was an orphan and



was raised without parents. Her manager was an orphan also. The orphanage recruits orphans to work at the hotel, to promote them and to give them an opportunity.

"I missed my daughter in Melbourne, because she is grown up and I don't hear much from her... So, I just sort of had this feeling that I want to help her," he said, and also described the many ways he has helped his Bangladeshi daughter.

"I helped her get a passport, helped her financially, and you know, it's literally all I've done. It's just encouragement, you know. It's just to say good morning every day, if you need anything let me know, if you're in trouble let me know, that's all there is to it."

"I don't need to [get documentation]. If they are over 18, legally, there is no problem. It's like an uncle thing, you know. It's just

helping someone. The same in Pakistan, you come across people, you see that they are genuine, you see that they are struggling, I feel blessed about the things that I've been doing now," Tony said, who also has four children from two marriages.

***The names of the adopted daughter and the hotel have not been disclosed to respect their privacy**

Salah seeks 'another title' for Liverpool veterans

AFP, Manchester

Mohamed Salah said Liverpool's veterans need another Premier League title after inspiring a 2-0 win at Manchester City to surge 11 points clear at the top of the table.

The 32-year-old, captain Virgil van Dijk, Alisson Becker, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson were all part of the Liverpool side that ended a 30-year wait to win the title in 2020.

And Salah reiterated his belief that they need another Premier League winner's medal to burnish their legacy.

"Maybe people prefer my first seasons or now but I prefer now because winning the league, helping the young players, it is special," he added.

"We need another title. Me and the big guys in the team, we need another title."

Salah was central to a statement win for the Reds as he opened the scoring and then teed up Dominik Szoboszlai to double Liverpool's lead before half-time.

Arne Slot's men are in a commanding position to secure a record-equalling 20th English top flight title, although second-placed Arsenal have a game in hand.

"Hopefully we keep calm because sometimes the pressure gets to us," said Salah, who took his tally for an incredible season to 30 goals and 21 assists.



➤ Salah is the first player in Premier League history to register 40 plus goal involvements in two different seasons (2017-18 and 2024-25).

➤ Salah has now recorded 41 goal involvements (25 goals and 16 assists) in 2024/25 in just 27 appearances. The Egyptian needs six more to match the Premier League record for most goal involvements, jointly held by Alan Shearer (1994/95) and Andy Cole (1993/94).

➤ The 32-year-old is the first player to score 25+ goals and register 15+ assists in a Premier League season.

➤ Salah has now scored and assisted in 11 Premier League games this season, the most by a player in a single season in one of Europe's big five leagues since Lionel Messi for Barcelona in 2014/15 (11).

➤ Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola has lost more games against Liverpool than any other opponent in his managerial career (10),