

'Mushfiqur's work ethic set him apart'

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Early yesterday morning, Mohannedan stars lined up to give Mushfiqur Rahim a guard of honour after the veteran batter announced his ODI retirement on social media the night before.

For Mushfiqur, there may have been some regret over how his ODI career ended. However, for his Mohannedan teammates, the moment was one of celebration.

Mushfiqur did not come out to bat against Rupganj Tigers yesterday in a game in which Mohannedan picked up their first win. He cut a cake at the end of the game with the likes of Tamim Iqbal, Mehedi Miraz, and others. He would leave the stadium right after the game, nonchalantly, in fact, for he only has a mind for the game, often to a fault.

Asked where Mushfiqur ranks as a batter, former Bangladesh skipper Habibul Bashar did not hesitate. "Top of the list," he said with a smile, as if the answer had been obvious before the question was even asked.

"The first thing we discussed about him was that he had sound technique. He's



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Neymar back for Brazil

REUTERS

Brazil have recalled Santos forward Neymar for this month's World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina after more than a year, the soccer federation announced on Thursday.

The 33-year-old sustained a knee injury in Brazil's World Cup qualifier against Uruguay in October 2023 and has struggled to get back to his best and secure a spot in the squad.

After a disappointing spell at Saudi Pro League side Al Hilal, Neymar returned to his boyhood club Santos in January, scoring three goals and providing three assists in seven matches which has caught the eye of Brazil coach Dorival Junior.



Neymar has 128 caps and a record 79 goals for his country, surpassing Pele's tally of 77.

He was part of Brazil's gold medal-winning squad at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and also helped them finish runners-up to Argentina at the 2021 Copa America.

Brazil, who are fifth in the CONMEBOL table with 18 points from 12 games, host Colombia on March 21 and visit Argentina five days later. The top six qualify directly for the World Cup.

A nostalgic look at BANGLADESH HOCKEY

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Lahore

"Wait for a few minutes, I'll get him too," Shahbaz Ahmed, former Pakistan hockey great who is also known as the 'Maradona of hockey', said this after exchanging greetings with this reporter yesterday noon at the National Hockey Stadium in Lahore, and went inside to look for Tahir Zaman, another Pakistan hockey legend.

Shahbaz and Tahir are big names in Asian hockey, both winning bronze medal in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the gold medal in the 1994 World Cup in Sydney for Pakistan.

The legendary duo also share a deep bond with Bangladesh as in the 90s, both of them represented Mohannedan in the Premier Division Hockey League and led them to hattrick league triumphs.

A little while passed and soon Shahbaz came out with Tahir from the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF) office, which is also inside the stadium premises, and then the conversations flowed.

"Tahir and I played exactly three years in Bangladesh and we really enjoyed our time there. Bangladeshi public loved us and they love our hockey. It was an incredible experience, it was unforgettable," said the 56-year-old Shahbaz.

Shahbaz and Tahir arrived in Dhaka as Olympic medallists and World Cup winners and their sheer presence created a buzz around hockey at the time with people coming to the stadium just to watch them play.

But those days of excitement are now a distant memory and both Shahbaz and Tahir were saddened by the sorry state of Bangladesh's hockey right now.

"Bangladesh's hockey system remains the same. I don't think you people have improved a lot...For a game like hockey, which isn't a big game in your country, you will need consistency. If players know that he can't go aboard to play



in any major tournament, he won't be motivated. When a young player isn't motivated, he can't perform well," said Shahbaz, who is also the secretary general of the PHF.

Meanwhile, Tahir, who is also the head coach of the Pakistan's national men's hockey team, claimed that inconsistency in administration and financial drawbacks are the main problems plaguing hockey in both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

"If we can have consistency in our processes, it will allow us to do some good work for hockey in Bangladesh and Pakistan," Tahir said.

"For example, suppose you are in the position to find a solution to a problem. I'm not there, I'm at the other side but I have the solution to the problem. But, it's you who will have to make the decision. So if we can be on the same page and do our work, then things can be solved.

"One of the major hurdles I would say is that we don't have a strong sustainable financial system in our country. Hockey has become a very expensive game now. You can't play hockey unless you have shoes worth USD 150, good quality hockey sticks cost more than USD 300, goalkeeping gear is nearing USD 5000.

So, we have to have a very sustainable financial model to run the game."

Tahir also spoke about how sudden changes in administration has affected hockey's development in both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

"Even in your country, inconsistency is there. For six months or one year, one guy is running the affairs and suddenly there is a change and someone else comes in. And he is there with a new programme and new manager. And the previous programme gets thrown into the dustbin. Then, you have to start again. Who suffers because of this, the players. How can we expect them to do their best when their learning and development process keeps getting interrupted," he added.

Shabaz could only express their disappointment at the ground reality and could not foresee better days ahead.

"I feel really disappointed and broken down when I see the current standard. It's not just the players' fault, the government is at fault too as they are not investing enough in hockey."

"If you don't invest enough, don't give central contracts, don't pay the coaches and don't give them jobs, who will play hockey?"

most importantly, worked incredibly hard. Talent was there, but it's his hard work that set him apart."

Bashar is not the only one to point out Mushfiqur's dedication. Faruque Ahmed, the current Bangladesh Cricket Board president and the former selector who brought Mushfiqur to the national side, also highlighted the cricketer's "work ethic" in a press release yesterday, expressing gratitude towards the batter.

In a testament to his hard work, Mushfiqur scored 4,714 runs -- nearly 60 percent of his career total -- at an average of over 43 and a strike rate of above 84 in the 134 ODIs between 2011 and 2020. It was during this purple patch that he earned the nickname "Mr. Dependable."

Along with the rest four of Bangladesh's 'Big Five' -- Tamim Iqbal, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Shakib Al Hasan, and Mahmudullah Riyad -- Mushfiqur was able to take Bangladesh to a new height. Though he will no longer don the red and green in ODIs, the hope remains that the 37-year-old will continue showcasing his class in Test cricket.



Raphinha leads 10-man Barca to victory

Raphinha struck a second-half winner to give Barcelona a lion-hearted 1-0 victory at Benfica on Wednesday as they overcame a red card for Pau Cubarsi early in the game to steal an advantage in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie. Cubarsi was given a straight red card for a last-man foul on Vangelis Pavlidis in the 22nd minute. However, Raphinha's 61st-minute strike proved enough for Barca to walk out with a win.



Kane double sinks Leverkusen

Bayern Munich's Harry Kane scored in each half to guide his team to a 3-0 victory over 10-man Bayer Leverkusen in their Champions League round of 16 first-leg match on Wednesday. Jamal Musiala scored the other goal for the Bavarians, who earned their first victory in the last seven matches against Xabi Alonso's Leverkusen and will take a significant advantage into next week's return leg.

Ravindra's rise puts Black Caps future in safe hands

AGENCIES

Kane Williamson has long been the cornerstone of New Zealand cricket, a player who thrives under pressure and consistently delivers when his team needs him the most.

However, against South Africa in the second Champion Trophy semifinal in Lahore on Wednesday, he found himself in an unfamiliar position—outscored in a partnership. As he and Rachin Ravindra stitched together a crucial 164-run stand for the second wicket, it was the younger batter who led the charge, scoring 82 to Williamson's 80.

This does not signal the end of Williamson's reign—far from it.

The Kiwi maestro has notched up two centuries in his last six ODIs and a magnificent 156 in his most recent Test outing. Yet, with the ever-evolving nature of international cricket and



the increasing lure of franchise leagues, Williamson may soon find himself weighing up his future, particularly in the white-ball format.

For New Zealand, the emergence of Ravindra as a formidable top-order batter has been a revelation. Initially introduced as an all-rounder batting at No. 7, his transition up the order

has cemented his place as one of the Black Caps' premier batters. His performances on the biggest stages have been nothing short of spectacular—three World Cup centuries and two more in the ongoing Champions Trophy. No other New Zealander in history has achieved such a feat.

The numbers speak volumes. Legends like Ross Taylor, Brendon McCullum, Martin Guptill, Stephen Fleming, and Martin Crowe all trail behind the 25-year-old in major tournament hundreds. Ravindra's rise has not gone unnoticed, especially by Williamson himself.

"He's an incredibly special talent," Williamson said. "It's always great to bat with him. He plays with such freedom and puts the team first. There were moments where things got tough, but we kept each other focused. He's gifted, confident, and knows exactly what he wants to do. We've seen it so many times, and he's done it again."



'Lucky' Liverpool edge PSG

Liverpool boss Arne Slot admitted his team had been extremely fortunate in their 1-0 win away to PSG in their Champions League last 16 first leg on Wednesday. "If we had a draw over here, we would have already been the lucky one," Slot said after the game. PSG dominated the first leg of the heavyweight last-16 tie, but Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker was in inspired form, and the visitors snatched an unlikely victory to take back to Anfield for the return as substitute Harvey Elliott scored in the 87th minute.

PHOTO: REUTERS