



NZ aim to make it three in three

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Dubai

Before a final, it's natural for teams to look for positive omens, something to boost the confidence of the players before they step onto the field to vie for the trophy.

For New Zealand, having India as opponents in the final of the ICC Champions Trophy in Dubai today is the biggest positive omen of all as against them the Black Caps are undefeated in ICC event finals.

The Kiwis have so far won two major ICC tournaments – ICC Knockout Trophy, currently known as Champions Trophy, in 2000 in Kenya and the ICC Test Championship in 2021 in England. And in both of those finals, they battled against India.

New Zealand have also reached the final of four other ICC events – 2009 Champions Trophy, 2015 ICC World Cup, 2019 World Cup and 2021 ICC T20 World Cup – but they ended up on the losing side against different opponents in all of them.

Before attending the practice session, New Zealand skipper Mitchell

Santner attended the pre-match press conference yesterday where this reporter reminded him of their spotless record in finals against India and asked him if it would aid them psychologically in today's final.

"I mean, hopefully we will be the third time lucky," Santner answered The Daily Star reporter.

"I think India will be a challenge tomorrow [Sunday]. They have been playing some really good cricket. They understand these conditions very well but we also have been playing decently," he said, adding that they know what to expect from the Dubai surface after facing India here a few days ago in a group-stage match which they lost by 44 runs.

"Obviously, having a run against India here a few days ago helped us out in understanding the conditions a bit better. But it's a knockout game and whoever turns up on the day, could take the trophy. "We know that it might be a different surface or it might play exactly the same. We need to be ready and adaptable for what's coming," he concluded.



H2H

India lead New Zealand 61-50 in ODIs, with one tie and seven no-results. India have dominated recently, winning the last six matches after a prior 4-0 New Zealand streak.

In ICC events, the rivalry is dead even at 6-6, with a 5-5 split in World Cups and 1-1 in the Champions Trophy. India, however, have won the last three meetings.

New Zealand hold the edge in ICC knockout matches, leading 3-1, including victory in the 2000 Champions Trophy final.

In the UAE, India have won five of six matches against New Zealand, including their last encounter in this tournament. Their only previous clash at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium (DICS) also saw India triumph. Also, India -- who have the chance to claim a record third Champions Trophy -- are yet to lose an ODI at DICS in 10 matches.

I guess finals cricket is different, but for us what we have been doing to get us to this point has been good.

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner



All of these guys have made an impact whenever they've got an opportunity and that gives us a lot of confidence [in the final].

India captain Rohit Sharma



It was a great atmosphere in the last game and I'm sure it'll be a good one again... [It's] an exciting opportunity for us.

New Zealand batter Kane Williamson



We know we're a good one-day side... The hunger, the commitment and the eagerness to try and do something special for the country is always there.

India coach Gautam Gambhir

Unyielding India confront spirited Kiwis

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Dubai

In less than a year, India will be aiming for another global title when they face fellow former champions New Zealand in a highly anticipated Champions Trophy final at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium in UAE today.

India's most recent major title came last year when they won the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies, marking their first world title since the 2013 Champions Trophy.

However, in the 50-over format, India have struggled in recent years. Despite reaching at least the semifinals in all four major 50-over tournaments since 2013 -- three World Cups and one

Champions Trophy -- they have failed to clinch the trophy.

"Once you get one title, it breaks the jinx. Winning the title [in 2024] doesn't make us less hungry but more balanced to win the next one," said India's vice-captain Shubman Gill in yesterday's pre-final press conference.

The Champions Trophy, however, is a different story. India have a solid record in the tournament, reaching the final in four out of eight events and winning the title twice -- in 2002 (as co-winners with Sri Lanka) and in 2013.

This year, India are the only unbeaten team in the tournament, having won all four of their matches, including a victory over New Zealand in their final group

game. Yet, Gill and Co will remember the heartbreaking defeat to Australia in the 2023 World Cup final following a winning streak of ten matches.

India's campaign this time has not been without controversy, with criticism for playing all matches in Dubai due to political tensions with Pakistan, while other teams split matches between Pakistan and the UAE.

The wickets in Dubai have proven challenging for high scores. India's 267 runs in the first semifinal, chasing down Australia's total, remains the highest team total in the tournament. The final will be played on the same wicket where India faced Pakistan in February, which also failed to produce a run-fest.

"I don't think the wicket will behave differently," Gill added, confident in the current Indian batting line-up, which he believes is the best he has ever been part of.

Meanwhile, New Zealand, regular finalists in recent ICC events, are targeting their first major title since the 2000 edition of the Champions Trophy. They have reached their fourth final since 2015, having won all but one of their group-stage games, including a clinical semifinal victory over South Africa.

With both sides in form and hungry for success, the final promises to be a thrilling contest that could pave the way for future triumphs.

BFF's financial motive hindering clubs?

ANISUR RAHMAN

The club football culture of a country largely determines its strength on the global stage -- a pattern evident in the most successful national teams worldwide.

In this regard, Bangladesh lags far behind, and one major reason could be the way the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) manages its top-flight league, the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

The lack of professionalism among football clubs in Bangladesh is nothing new. Most clubs don't have their own stadiums, proper training facilities that provide year-round access to players, and structured youth programs.

Amid these challenges, the BFF seems to be adding to the struggles of BPL clubs as it has suspended the country's professional football league for seven weeks to accommodate the upcoming international fixture of the Bangladesh national football team.

To make room for the national team's preparations for the Asian Cup Qualifier against India on March 25, the BPL has been halted until April 10, right after the completion of the league's 10th round on February 22.

The motive behind this lengthy break appears to be financial.

"BFF runs with financial help from FIFA. One of FIFA's guidelines states

that if a country's professional league lasts for six months, the federation will receive USD 50,000. Instead of protecting the clubs, the BFF is chasing that allocation," said Brothers Union manager Amer Khan.



November 29 last year and, according to the schedule, will conclude on May 29 this year -- precisely six months.

This timeline makes it clear why the BFF imposed such a lengthy mid-season break, despite clubs requesting



club premises.

"We are really struggling to keep the camp running because of Mohammedan's financial situation. So, we released all players after our last match and plan to resume training on March 16," said head coach Alfaz Ahmed.

Meanwhile, at Abahani's club tent in Dhanmondi, training resumed last Tuesday, maintaining a lively atmosphere. However, financially, the club faces the same difficulties as others.

"It's really challenging to maintain consistent performance. Without regular activity, players lose their peak form. When they stay in training, they remain motivated, but inactivity makes them too relaxed. That's why we've continued training despite financial issues," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

All the other clubs are either set to resume their training this week or after the Eid-ul-Fitr break due to financial difficulties.

As things stand, the BFF appears to be prioritising its financial benefits over the well-being of clubs -- raising an important question: Is it justifiable to hinder football development in pursuit of financial gains?

If such decisions persist, Bangladesh's already underdeveloped club football structure will only deteriorate further.

With a long break in the league, Abahani players (L) resumed training while the foreign players of Mohammedan, who suspended camp, were left spending time in the gym.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Amer also pointed out that clubs have been struggling to operate, particularly since the country's change in political landscape following the July uprising has led to shifts in club management across the boards.

Having missed out on the USD 50,000 allocation last season for concluding the BPL just about 10 days short of the six-month mark, the BFF seems determined to secure the funding this time.

The 2024-25 season kicked off on

a shorter pause that would have helped them manage operational costs during a financial crunch.

A visit to Mohammedan's club tent in Motijheel painted a stark picture of the crisis.

Mohammedan, one of Bangladesh's most popular clubs, currently lead the table and are in a prime position to win the league for the first time. Their players were supposed to continue training to maintain momentum, but a gloomy atmosphere hung over the



Nottingham Forest forward Callum Hudson-Odoi celebrates scoring the all-important goal in a 1-0 win against defending Premier League champions Manchester City at the City Ground yesterday. The win consolidated Forest's third spot with 51 points. City remained provisionally in fourth position with 47 points, 20 points behind leaders Liverpool.

PHOTO: BFF

Bangladesh to host Zimbabwe for two Tests in April-May

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday announced the itinerary for Bangladesh's upcoming home Test series against Zimbabwe in April-May.

The Zimbabwe team will arrive in Bangladesh on April 15 to play a two-Test series against the Tigers.

The first Test will begin on April 20 at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium. After the match, both teams will move to Chattogram for the second Test, which will be played at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium from April 28.

The Zimbabweans will leave Bangladesh on May 3.

Zimbabwe last played a Test in Bangladesh in February 2020, with the hosts winning the one-off match by an innings and 106 runs.

The two-Test series was originally scheduled to take place in January 2024, but the BCB deferred the Tests and instead staged a five-match T20I series as preparation for the Tigers ahead of the ICC T20 World Cup 2024.

This will also be Bangladesh's first Test series of the year. Bangladesh's last Test series was in November last year, when they took on the West Indies in the Caribbean and levelled the two-Test series 1-1.

Booters' Sudan tie uncertain

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh football team's proposed practice match against Sudan was thrown into uncertainty after the African nation declined to play it on Saturday, without fixing a new date.

Bangladesh have been camping in Taif, Saudi Arabia for the last three days and were scheduled to play three practice matches – one against Sudan and the two other against clubs from Saudi Arabia. However, the uncertainty over the Sudan match would certainly disturb the team's preparations ahead of their Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture against India on March 25.

"We were told about a match on March 8. Sudan's coach had asked us to schedule the match on March 9. This morning they told us that they would play this fixture at a later date," national team manager Amer Khan said in a video message.

Meanwhile, in a separate message, defender Rahmat Mia said that they did not expect the kind of cold weather that is prevailing in Taif at this time, but said it would help them against India due to similar weather and altitude in Shillong.



Students of Bangladesh Krira Shiksha Protishthan take part in an exhibition football match at one of the grounds of BKSP in Savar, marking the AFC Women's Football Day, organised by the Bangladesh Football Federation, yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF